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'LIZA JANE, THE GIRL MINER; or, THE IRON-NERVED SPORT.

BY EDWARD L. WHEELER,

AUTHOR OF "DEADWOOD DICK" NOVELS, "ROSEBUD ROB" NOVELS, "DENVER DOLL" NOVELS, ETC., ETC.



"STOP YER HOSS! STOP YER HOSS, JANE, OR SAM WILL BE KILLED," SEVERAL OF THE SCORPION'S CRONIES YELLED.

'Liza Jane, THE GIRL MINER; OR, The Iron-Nerved Sport.

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CHAPTER I.

THE PERI OF THE GULCH PARADISE.

"G'LANG, Mehetible, you lazy beast, or we'll not get to our journey's end, to-day. Consarn you, behave yer switchin'. There ain't a fly near ye. Heigh ho!

"On the other side o' Jordan,
In the sweet fields of—"

"Jerusalem! Can it be possible?"

The lone traveler reined in his *burro*, with very little effort, for it was by no means a fiery, untamed beast, and sat staring ahead of him.

The course of his journey lay through a narrow gulch, walled in at the right and left by precipitous hights, upon which clung only an occasional shrub or tuft of vegetation.

A gurgling little stream ran down the gulch, frequently crossing the seldom-traveled mule-trail.

For miles the traveler had toiled on through this gulch, without encountering a sign of human habitation—nor, did game of any kind seem to infest the district, which a disastrous fire had evidently swept through some time in the past, for the towering hights and hills presented a black, smoked appearance, which detracted much from their grandeur.

It was just after rounding an abrupt bend in the gulch, that the man and his steed came to a halt, and the cause of the wayfarer's surprise was readily apparent.

After rounding the bend, the gulch continued on its sinuous course, while to the right of the trail, a dark, narrow glen branched abruptly off, and penetrated a short distance into the mountains.

Facing the mule-trail, at the mouth of this glen, stood a small but strong cabin, with a veranda in front. A chair was placed upon this veranda; a hammock was swung in under the shade of a large tree, whose limbs reached out to the cabin roof; a bed of flowers bloomed just beside the path leading from the trail to the steps.

It was a pretty and picturesque spot, and there was something so refreshing about the fact, to travel-stained Parson Priggins, that he was excusable for drawing rein in surprise.

He saw more than we have described, too—a system of sluice-boxes, that had their beginning somewhere up in the glen, and running down past the cabin, emptied their muddy waters into the little gulch streamlet; he saw a young and pretty girl near the shanty, engaged in shoveling a small heap of dirt into one of the sluice-ways, and working the "cradle" in a very business-like manner, as if she were no less than a time-tried veteran at the profession of gold-mining.

Parson Priggins was only thirty, good-looking, after a meek fashion, unmarried, fairly educated, and had a snug little "nest egg" in the wallet which he invariably carried in his inside vest pocket.

Therefore, no wonder his heart beat a little faster, as his gaze wandered from the cosy cabin to the cosier little piece of femininity working at the cradle.

She was, possibly, nineteen years of age, though her fresh face looked even younger; she was a trifle below the medium stature of women, but perfectly molded in figure.

Her face was markedly pretty, and wore the confident expression of a brave soul, as also did her brown eyes, and small but resolute mouth; her hair was between a brown and an auburn shade, and fell in delightful confusion to her waist.

She was dressed in a homespun waist and skirt, the latter not reaching quite to the shapely ankles; her feet were incased in a dainty pair of leather-top boots; a broad-rim slouch hat was set back upon her head, and a belt about her waist contained a pair of gold-mounted revolvers.

This much saw Parson Priggins, without being seen by the dashing Girl Miner; then, his

curiosity getting the better of him, he urged the *burro* toward this paradise of the gulch.

"G'lang, Mehetible, you beast! At last, it appears, we have reached the boundaries of civilization."

The footfalls of the animal soon reach the girl's hearing, and she hastily seized a rifle, which was leaning against a bowlder, but laid it down again, when she noted the ministerial aspect of the new-comer.

"No tough, thar!" she commended. "Looks as if he might hev jest fell out of a camp-meetin'."

And a moment later, Priggins drew rein, and doffed his beaver, in true Chesterfieldian style.

"Good-afternoon, sis!" he saluted.

"Howdy do, sonny!" the Girl Miner retorted.

"Does yer mother know you're out, pray?"

"Quite well, miss," the parson replied, seeing that "sis" did not strike the girl favorably, "or at least the old folks ought to know, since I'm two months gone from Montpelier."

"Oh! you're from the East?"

"I am, and am proud to say it. I hope I do not look like the rough Western characters I've met, so far?"

"Oh! no. You're just too sweet for anything. Where you going?"

"To uncle's, an' no further. Dunno how fur that is, I suppose? Nor I, nuther. Reckon it's a good piece on yet. What's yer name? Mine's Jim Priggins."

"And mine is 'Liza Jane'?"

"'Liza Jane! Jerusalem! I us'ter court old Gilroy's gal, who was called 'Liza Jane. What's yer other name?"

"Give it up!"

"Ye did? That's queer! Whar's the old folks—don't see any of 'em about?"

"Good reason. Thar ain't none."

"Phew! Ye don't mean to say ye live all alone, hyer, by yerself, in this lonesome country."

"That's the case."

"Sho! You must be nervy, ef I do say it."

"Prhaps I am!"

The girl spoke in a dry, good-natured way, that seemed habitual with her.

"Guess you're a preacher, ain't ye?" she added, a twinkle in her eye.

"Why?" and Priggins stared.

"Oh! I suspected so. You don't sw'ar!"

"Great guns! Is that how ye tell? Why, up at Snodgrass Corners, nobody swears."

"All preachers, eh?"

"No, but they all knows the commandments. Ye see my father aire deacon o' the church, an' he got me to study up ministry."

"Well, how did you make out?"

"Purty well. Ye see I got along well, till I tackled preachin', fer I us'ter do the marryin' up brown. But one day suthin' happened, an' dad said I better take a vacation fer awhile."

"Indeed."

"Yes; you see old man Byles wanted his son Jack to do the preachin', 'cause the collection wasn't no small penny of a Sunday. But it made Byles awful mad when I stepped in. So he us'ter try to annoy me, an' one day he set up some o' the members to go to sleep an' snore, while I was preachin'. I stood it awhile, an' then I told Byles if he didn't quit, I'd come down an' punch his warty nose. He wiggled his ear at me an' laughed; then I mounted him, an' threwed him out the winder, inter Garrick's sheep-pasture, where the ugly ram went fer him, an' when Byles got hum, he couldn't set down fer a week. So, as tar-an'-feathers were plenty at the Corners, I tho't I'd come out and visit uncle."

"Think of preachin' out here?"

"Not till I git acquainted. Know w'at my uncle lives?"

"What's his handle?"

"His handle?"

"Yes; his name."

"Oh! Why, he us'ter be Hank Wetherill, but I've hearn tell as how he's got cunnel fixed to his name now."

"Ha! ha! I know where Colonel Wetherill lives," and 'Liza Jane's eyes flashed and her cheeks flushed. "He's a stuck-up aristocrat, as lives on a ranch, jest out o' Pokerville."

"You don't tell? Know him, then?"

"I know all I want to of him. He's a regular cuss fer meanness, an' nobody likes him, they say."

"Where is Pokerville?"

"Down below, where the gulch comes out on the bottoms. The colonel's place is beyond the camp."

"Nice place?"

"Scrumptious!"

"And Pokerville?"

"The hardest hole of its size, along the range, you bet. If you've got lots of wealth to part with, go there."

"Not much! I want yer to guide me to uncle's. I'll pay ye wages for it."

"You'll have to excuse me. I do not care to go there."

"Git out! Ef ye go with Jim Priggins, it will be all right."

The girl eyed him steadily.

"You're all right," she said, "but if I was you, I wouldn't go there!"

"Thun—I mean Jerusalem. Why not?"

"You don't know 'em. They're a stiff lot. Like as not you'd get snubbed!"

The young parson's eyes snapped.

"Kinder look meek an' preacher-fied is why ye think I'll take snubbin's, eh?" he said.

"Well, all right. Ye don't know me."

"Maybe not. But, if I were you, I'd wait till to-morrow."

"Why?"

"Because, there's goin' to be a wedding at the Elms to-night—a bang-up, high-toned affair, too, which will be attended by folks from the army, from Washington, an' blazes knows where—regular freeze-ye-up-stiff nobs, ye see, in silks an' broadcloth. That's why I allow maybe a country cousin wouldn't be welcome."

Priggins was silent a moment.

His eyes were riveted upon the ground, and the peculiar expression on his face was not easy to interpret.

"I understand what you mean?" he said, "but I don't keer a durned ef I'm welcome or not. I walks right in, ye see, an' 'twixt you an' I, Henry Wetherill *dassen't* turn me out."

"Indeed? He is a man who seldom attempts a thing without doing it."

"That's all right. Who's to git spliced?"

"Theo!"

"Is she a nice 'un?"

"She is pretty—in a stony way—self-conceited, haughty and disagreeably arrogant."

"You two don't hitch."

"No. As the tiger hates the lion, so the Wetherills hate me."

"Why?"

"I do not feel disposed to tell."

"Secret, eh? Who's the gal going to marry?"

"A Californian, Clinton Carmen, by name."

"Who is going to marry them?"

"Squire Hines, of Pokerville."

"Humph! Well, I guess you and I will take in that splicin'-bee, Miss 'Liza Jane, so get ready!"

He spoke as though it were a settled affair, and slid out of the saddle to let Mehetibel drink from one of the sluice-boxes, the water now running clear.

"Sir," the Girl Miner said, "I told you I could not go."

"Why not, pray?"

"For different reasons. I would not be welcome."

"I'll fix that. I want you to go, to show me the way."

She was silent a few moments, her eyes wandering toward the sun, which was nearing the horizon, but finally spoke:

"Mr. Priggins, we are strangers, but I believe you to be a gentleman, and I will consent to accompany you, on conditions."

"Name them," he said, quietly.

"Very well. Firstly, I have a morbid curiosity to explore the Wetherill mansion, and if I go with you, I propose to do it while the ceremony is taking place. In this action I shall expect you will not give me away."

"It is settled. Go on."

"The second condition is, that you perform the marriage ceremony!" 'Liza Jane said, emphatically.

He looked at her in surprise that he made no attempt to disguise.

"Why do you wish that?" he demanded.

"I decline to answer, sir."

"Well, it's all the same, anyhow. It is settled that if Theo Wetherill gits spliced, I'm goin' to do the job. So everything being settled, let's be off as soon as possible."

"No hurry. They're not to be married till eight or later, and it is but a short ride from here. I do not care to be seen in the vicinity until after dark. Let your horse graze, and we'll have tea!"

She gathered up a pouch which contained the gold she had washed out that day, and led the way to the cabin.

Within everything was in the rude style of the mines, but neatness prevailed everywhere.

Jim Priggins could but admit that even at home, there was no more cheery evidence of a home than within the Girl Miner's abode.

'Liza Jane bustled about, and soon had a tempting repast set forth, consisting of dried venison, bread, coffee and huckleberries, not to mention a dish of wild honey to take place of butter.

"Thun— Jerusalem, I mean," Priggins said, delightedly; "this is ninety shades better'n anything I've struck for a fortnight, hanged if it ain't. Wouldn't mind puttin' up heer, if ye don't charge tew much for board."

"I don't run a hotel," 'Liza Jane replied, smilingly, "and, accordingly, could not accommodate you."

"You're a queer 'un. Don't no one never bother ye?"

"Not often. If they do I generally plants 'em. See that knoll across the gulch? That's my cemetery. Got two Injuns an' one tough planted there. Folks fight kinder shy o' hyer, 'cause Dragon Gulch is haunted, you know."

"Thun— Jerusalem! What?"

"I remarked that this gulch aire haunted!" 'Liza Jane answered, soberly.

"Haunted? By ghosts?"

"Yes. Did you ever see the picture of a dragon, such as us'ter promenade in former ages—the winged crocodile, with barbed tongue, eyes of fire and so forth?"

"Yas."

"Well, such a monster haunts this gulch by night, at frequent periods. I suppose were diamonds strewn by bushels, hereabouts, no one would venture here, who knows of the dragon!"

Priggins's surprise had vanished; he seemed deeply interested.

"The dragon," went on 'Liza Jane, "is a terror to the surrounding country. It is as near the size of a *burro* as anything else, but has the appearance of a crocodile with wings. Its legs are longer, however, and thicker, and covered with scales. Its eyes seem to be balls of flame, and with fire leaping from its open mouth, it rushes by with terrific speed, bearing on its back, a human figure, clad in ghostly white. The rider's face is deathly white, as is its beard and streaming hair, and this thing, for it is nothing else, is known as Don Dragon."

Priggins laughed.

"You've seen it?" he asked.

"Yes." Then she unslung a field glass from her belt, and gave it to him.

"Watch the painted board across the gulch," she commanded.

She then drew a revolver, and fired the six shots it held.

"Thun— Jerusalem!" Priggins gasped.

"Those bullets didn't go a quarter of an inch apart. You're a dead-shot."

"Then, Don Dragon is not mortal, for if I have fired at him and his steed once, I have fired a hundred times."

"And—?"

"Wasted my ammunition. So has every man in Pokerville, I reckon. But, come; I will call my horse, and we'll be off. You may have an opportunity to see the dragon, to-night."

CHAPTER II.

THUNDERBOLT 'TAKES A HAND.'

'LIZA JANE flung an oilskin cloak about her shoulders—for the heavens offered evidence of a storm's approach—and, then, seizing her rifle, she and Priggins left the cabin.

"Don't ye lock up?" he asked, seeing that she left the door wide open.

"Ha! ha! no. Little fear any one will enter my palace, during my absence!"

She then took a silver whistle from her pocket, and blew a peculiar blast upon it, which was directly answered, for an unbridled and unsaddled horse came dashing down out of the glen.

It was a handsome snowy-white, clean-limbed and spirited creature, and Priggins could but look ruefully at his own serene *burro*, which was browsing near by.

'Liza Jane sprung nimbly to her steed's back, as it paused near by her, taking no heed of Priggins's proffered assistance.

"Look out for yourself, parson. I can allus look out fer 'Liza Jane," she advised.

"But, Jerusalem! ain't ye goin' ter put on no bridle an' saddle, young lady?"

"Nary! Thunderbolt wouldn't bear one. We knows our P's an' Q's, don't we, beauty? Come, parson!"

And she was dashing away down the gulch, nearly out of sight, ere the parson could get his sorry beast under way.

The Girl Miner, however, finally waited for him to come up, her eye dancing with mischief.

"You'd do well to chase a road-agent—that is, so far as the agent was interested," she laughed.

"Thun— I mean, thar ain't no road-agents in these parts?" he puffed, the ungainly canter of the *burro* having bounced him up a good deal.

"Oh! you bet!" 'Liza assured. "They're thicker'n fleas on a Denver dorg. Never was to Denver, eh? More dorgs thar than people. An' road-agents? Why, we've got lots of 'em, around here! Some gallus, bang-up fellers, too! Nigh every man in Pokerville has had experience at the business."

"Jerusalem! Ye ain't goin' that way?"

"You bet! Want to stop at the post-office, for a cigar."

Priggins looked horrified.

"You don't smoke?" he faintly articulated.

"Bet I do! Have to, now an' then, 'cause I've got to do suthin' to keep my tongue still. Needn't be afeared o' Pokerville, tho', when I'm around."

"Why not?"

"Oh! I'm the belle o' that town, an' what I grin at the gang smiles at, or draps! That's where I got the dead-wood on old Wetherill's gal. She likes me enough to dig my eyes out. She was soft soapin' around old bald-headed Bixby, who runs the Demijohn—wuth a mint, he is;—so I stepped in, cut her out, and then sacked old Bix!"

"Is it really a bad town, miss?"

"Well, some, I reckon, tho' thar hasn't been a plantin' fer over a week. Can ye shute?"

"I kin take the head off'n a squirrel every time wi' a shot-gun," he answered confidently.

"You're the stuff, then! If a feller cums struttin' along, wi' revolvers stickin' out o' his boot-legs, an' lugs cross-eyed at ye, as if he'd delight to make a meal o' you, don't ye scare, but pull yer pop an' salivate him in the eye. Arter you plant yer furst man, all will be straight!"

"But, that would be murder!"

"Pshaw—no! That's only counted a dispensation o' Providence, up in these parts. If a man screws his mouth at you, it means he's on the rampage, an' ef ye don't plug him he'll lay ye on yer back!"

During the remainder of the journey, Priggins was grimly silent, evidently ruminating over the prospectus that 'Liza Jane, dare-devil that she was, had so coolly laid out for him to subscribe to.

About dusk they cantered down into Pokerville, which was located in the mouth of the gulch, and looked out over a vast expanse of rolling prairie or bottom-lands, which stretched to the westward.

Pokerville was practically a mining-camp of three-score of inhabitants, though it was, at the same time, a supply-station, and a herder's or cowboy's rendezvous, so that its population was made up of many grades of human beings—a heterogeneous mob of the rougher element of various races and nationalities, in which the roystering rough of the mines was most prominent.

Few well-disposed people lived there, although the surrounding country was fairly well populated with a more estimable class of citizens.

There was but one street, and all the shanties, cabins and tents faced upon this, the business part of the town being about the Demijohn, a combination of drinking-saloon and hotel, kept by old Blood Bixby, the richest man in the camp.

Across from the Demijohn was the grocery-store and post-office, adjoining which was Hemlock Harry's gambling "palace," known as the "Four Aces." Then there were several other stores and saloons, and the dwellings, which made up the camp.

'Liza Jane had intimated to Priggins that Pokerville had been rather quiet, of late; nevertheless there were plenty of ill-looking ruffians in front of the saloons, as the Girl Miner and the parson cantered down into the place.

As they neared the post-office, 'Liza Jane said:

"Now, then, look your bravest, Priggys, old gal, and mind you don't let any one look squint-eyed or pucker-mouthed at you. Have you got a shutin'-iron?"

"No—nor do I want one!" was the quiet reply, which 'Liza took as a hint that Mr. Priggins considered himself solid, without deadly weapons.

At the post-office they drew rein, and 'Liza Jane left the parson to mind the horses, while she ran in for the mail.

She had hardly disappeared within the grocery, when a burly-looking rough came striding down the street, with a confident swagger, and paused to stare at the parson, as he drew near.

He possessed a huge body, with limbs to match, and his red, bloated face was terribly scarred and wore a week's growth of beard. His whole appearance was brutal and disgusting, and the revolvers he sported in his belt detracted nothing from his ferocious aspect.

"Hillo, thar, me pious-lukin' tenderfoot, whar did ye cum from?" he demanded, gruffly, evidently calculating to awe the parson, from the start. "Come! come! chirp out, lively!"

"None of your business, where I came from!" Priggins replied, with coolness scarcely in keeping with his pious aspect.

And Scorpion Sam, the "bad man" of Pokerville, was surprised.

"Did I understand ye right?" he demanded, his face getting more fiery as he stepped close to the side of the parson's *burro*. "Did ye venture to remark anything jist then?"

And he leered insinuatingly, while a crowd gathered in anticipation of a "funeral," which Scorpion Sam had the reputation of being able to arrange on short notice.

"I did remark, I believe!" the parson said, quietly, "that it was none of your business, and I further venture to emphasize that remark!"

Then there was a detonating spat, which was too quickly given to be readily comprehended by the bystanders, and Mr. Scorpion Sam dropped serenely upon the ground, rolled partly over, and was quiet.

Parson Priggins could not claim all the glory, however, if so disposed, for, seeming to notice a long-looked-for opportunity, 'Liza Jane's fiery steed gave a snort and wheeling upon its hind feet, dropped its head forward, seized Scorpion Sam by the seat of his trousers, and raising him by the grip of its strong teeth, started off up the gulch at a dead run, amid excited shouts from the assembled spectators.

Half a mile—perhaps a little further—from Pokerville was the residence of Colonel Henry Wetherill, within the boundaries of his valuable ranch of a thousand acres.

This ranch had been located, and this residence built, some three years before, when Pokerville was not in existence, consequently it was not known just how Colonel Wetherill came by the magnificent estate.

Rumor said that the ranch had been owned first by an Arizona miner, who was partly crazy, and had been bought of him for a mere song, so to speak, by the colonel.

Indeed, viewing the residence and its immediate surroundings one could scarcely doubt that the former owner was decidedly "off," mentally, for fitting up such a residence in a wild, virtually unsettled country, at that time far from the nearest haunts of civilization.

The residence itself was of block graystone, a valuable quarry of which was upon the estate. The house covered a large area of ground, and was like unto some of the old Spanish castles, half arsenal and half monastery, with towers, battlements, strange gables, and great central court, with dark cellared apartments under the whole structure.

There were numberless rooms, so numerous, said those who ought to know, that many were never used or entered by the Wetherills. Then, too, a rumor had somehow got out that there were apartments no one knew of, and that spirits were wont to haunt these, sometimes appearing at the top of the turrets at the dead of night.

These rumors, however, were generally valued for about what idle rumors usually are.

At any rate, 'twas not to be denied that within doors the Elms was as near to a palace, in the way of luxurious furniture and adornments, as a millionaire's purse well could make it.

Then there were fine outbuildings, a well-kept lawn, flower-gardens, a large natural pond, with the more dignified name of Lake Theo; a graveled carriage-drive to Pokerville, and, in fact, seemingly everything that could conduce to the happiness of a home.

The colonel was a man of means, 'twas said; anyhow, he lived in the best style, had distinguished visitors, in whose honor he gave grand receptions; was lavish with his money at the camp; had his grand barouche and retinue of servants; owned a thousand head of cattle and many sheep and horses, and had the help to look after them; yet there were but the two—father and daughter.

A half-tipsy miner, at Pokerville, one night, had said that there were more Wetherills than two, when the ranch changed hands; but, as he had "died with his boots on," the same hour, no one felt disposed to believe him.

Henry Wetherill was not over-well liked by the Pokervillians; but as Henry Wetherill's

hired help numbered a small regiment of the hardest fighting characters in that section, no one dared to try a rumpus with the "Nabob," as he was called.

He was a man of forty-odd years, rather prepossessing in appearance, with a portly form, a full, mustache shaded face, silver-streaked hair, and dark intelligent eyes.

He dressed well, used good language, and was apparently well calculated for the position he occupied.

His daughter had been fairly described by 'Liza Jane, the Girl Miner.

She was eighteen, tall and of stately figure, but though pretty of feature, it was of that cold, stony type of beauty which repulses rather than attracts. As was her face, so was her temperament, cold, arrogant and haughty—and Blood Bixby, of Pokerville, who, after burying the second Mrs. B., considered that he ought to be a judge, stated that he would much rather make love to an icicle, if it was financially as well backed as Miss Wetherill.

She dressed grandly, was said to be accomplished—

And yet the Wetherills did not seem happy, despite the luxury they lived in.

When out for their morning ride—which was the only time they were seen together—they never were known to smile, nor to exchange a pleasant remark, as a sign of affection.

Henry Wetherill now and then dropped in, of an evening, at Hemlock Harry's, but no one could say that they ever saw him smile and say it truthfully. It always appeared as if some great sorrow or secret were worrying him like a relentless phantom.

Another peculiarity of the Wetherills was the fact that they were never without a number of guests, all of whom were apparently well-to-do, and occupied a high social position. Army officers and their families, legislators and distinguished people were constantly coming and going to and from the Elms; and Eight-Toed Eph, the stage-driver, boasted of having carried more "big guns" on his coach than any other man in the mountains.

The servants of the Wetherill place were numerous, but one time-tried servitor, of the colored persuasion, named Suse, "bossed" everything from the pantry to the wine cellar.

And Suse was so near white that she considered herself as good as "white fo'ks."

In the Pokerville bank, it was known 'hat Suse had the snug little sum of six thousand dollars laid by. Hemlock Harry did the banking business for any one who had savings to lay by; the "Four Aces" was, consequently, the bank.

Hence the marriageably disposed element was "struck" after Suse, and all she had to do, when she wanted a husband, was to "nominate her choice."

Suse would imbibe, occasionally, however, and drop up into camp to fill her bottle, at such times as she didn't care to go to the Wetherill wine-vault. On such occasions she would be a little newsy, and then, only, the Pokervillians could learn much of the goings-on at the castle.

Henry Wetherill kept his ready cash at the Elms, evidently, for he had no banker at the camp, and had been known to win as high as ten thousand dollars of an evening at the "Four Aces."

We have stated that few cared to declare enmity against him; yet there was one man who was not careful in making known his hatred of the Nabob—a pal, he was, of the ruffian Scorpion Sam, who rejoiced under the characteristic name of Liver Legs; though, how he came by the appellation, no one seemed to know.

He was a typical rough, and a boon companion of Scorpion Sam, the camp bully.

Liver Legs had once been in the employ of Henry Wetherill but for some reason unknown to the public, had reappeared one night, minus both eyes, and covered with blood.

No coaxing could induce him to give any explanation of the mystery, more than to state that he had met with an accident, and would yet be revenged on the colonel.

Another matter which served to bring the Wetherills into more prominence to the gossip-mongers, was the fact that the Devil Don and his terrible dragon steed, seemed to haunt the vicinity of the Elms at night, and was said to have been seen on several occasions on the top of the great tower on one corner of the building, and could only be reached by passing through the house; and the occasions when it was thus seen were in the dead of night, at which time it appeared surrounded by a weird spectral light.

The colonel had offered a large reward for a

solution of the mystery, but no one stepped forward to attempt to "lay" the thing, until—

About the hour that 'Liza Jane and Parson Priggins arrived in Pokerville, a stranger on horseback approached the Elms by way of the sinuous drive.

CHAPTER III.

IRON-NERVE, THE SPORT.

THE man who cantered leisurely up the shaded drive leading to the Elms, was one who would attract attention anywhere.

Though young in years—for not over twenty-five summers had passed over his head—his whole physique was that of a man constantly inured to the hardships and perils natural to the existence of a free ranger.

In stature he was of medium height, and was attired in a costume of elaborately tanned and fringed buckskin, with spurred top-boots, and a sombrero.

His hair was cut short, however; his handsomely chiseled but sun-tanned face was destitute of beard, excepting a slight, well-trimmed mustache, giving him a more boyish appearance; his eagle eyes were piercing, yet with a womanly softness of expression.

He was armed with an elegant Springfield rifle, which, judging by the costly trimmings and chasings upon it, had been the present of a friend or friends.

His belt was also well supplied with small-arms; and the deep black horse he bestrode was an animal of more than ordinary mettle.

As if a part of the spirited horse, did the stranger ride, showing that he was a fine equestrian.

He rode up to the carriage-steps, and securing his horse, mounted the veranda, and sounded the knocker.

The summons was answered by Suse, who started at the handsome sport, inquiringly.

"Does Colonel Henry Wetherill live here?" the stranger asked, tipping his sombrero politely, a mark of respect that at once won the gentle negress.

"Yes, sah! de cunnel libs right heah!" she responded.

"Thank you. I haven't a card, but kindly tell him a gentleman desires to speak with him."

"What's de name, sah?"

"Iron-Nerve."

"De good Lor' bress us, what a name! 'Spects de boss isn't at liberty, sah! House done chuck full vis'tors, sah—big bugs, sah!"

"Never you mind about them, my good woman. You say to the colonel, that Iron-Nerve Nat wants to see him on important business."

And the sport slipped a quarter-eagle into her ebony hands, which had the effect to cause Suse's instant disappearance down the grand but gloomy hall.

As she left the door ajar, Iron-Nerve entered the hall, and as he spied another door to his right partly open, and presumed it led into a parlor, he stepped within.

It was indeed a parlor—one of the grandest the sport had ever seen, for the room in itself was large, and the furnishings were the choicest that a lavish expenditure of money could procure—quite astonishing, indeed, for that remote region.

Upon a sofa, in one corner, sat a young lady and gentleman engaged in low conversation; the lady was clad in a robe of pink satin, with costly lace trimmings; the gentleman in black broadcloth, white vest and tie.

This lady was Miss Theo Wetherill; the well-formed gentleman, with tawny mustache, was Clinton Carmen, Miss Wetherill's betrothed.

He arose with a haughty stare, as Iron-Nerve Nat stepped into the apartment.

"Sir! you have made a mistake, I presume," he said, in a freezing tone.

"I presume not!" Nat replied, coolly, as he became seated. "Mr. Wetherill will join me, directly—I will await him here."

"You will find the reception-parlor on the opposite side of the hall, sir. Be kind enough to step that way!" Miss Wetherill demanded.

"Thank you. I am quite comfortable here," was the provokingly cool dissent. "Do not let me interrupt your *tete-a-tete*, in the least."

Carmen's naturally red face assumed an apoplectic hue, and he took a couple of steps forward, in great anger.

"Will you leave this room?" he demanded in high anger.

"Directly—after the colonel comes!" with imperturbable nonchalance.

"But, I say *now*!" Carmen roared, his rage now at a boiling-point. "If you don't leave this room at once, I'll throw you out, you ill-bred ruffian!"

"You haven't got the muscle to do it," Iron-Nerve smiled. "Be seated, sir, or you are liable to be taken sick, and won't be able to play bridegroom, to-night!"

The words seemed to imply a threat, and the sport's hand dropped significantly to the butt of a revolver.

Miss Wetherill screamed.

Carmen caught hold of a bell-cord, and gave it a jerk.

"We'll see!" he gritted.

The following instant, a narrow door which a large pier mirror had hidden from view, swung inward, and two treacherous Mexican peons glided into the room.

Their very appearance was a certificate of their evil natures, and what their duties were at the Elms.

Iron-Nerve started a little, at their sudden appearance, but his face expressed no surprise or fear.

"At him, Gila, Pipo!" Carmen hissed, savagely. "Pitch him out of the house!"

Instantly the two peons started for the sport, their black eyes gleaming, like those of a serpent.

They stopped suddenly, however, for there were two rapid shots, and the tools of Clinton Carmen were whirled half around in their tracks—an ear cut off of each!

"Now off with you, you fools, or the next shot will be to kill!" the young and now terribly defiant stranger cried, with still leveled revolver.

It was enough. With howls of fear and anger the two servitors vanished as they had come, just as Colonel Wetherill burst into the room.

"Who is shot? What does this mean?" the colonel gasped, excitedly.

"It means that yonder puppy attempted to have me thrown out, by your hirelings, and I shot an ear off of each," Iron-Nerve answered, "to learn them manners!"

"In God's name, who are you?—why are you here?" the Nabob asked, his face white, and eyes wildly glaring.

"I am Nat Blossom—usually nicknamed Iron-Nerve. I entered this parlor, and was ordered out. I didn't feel disposed to leave, and the *dude*, yonder, set the two Greasers on me. Henry Wetherill, I came to see you, on business,—not the *dude*! Let's retire to the open air—the atmosphere, here, is decidedly too sweet for me. Come!"

He stepped from the parlor, and out upon the veranda, where were several chairs.

The Nabob followed him, and both became seated.

The pallor had not left the former's face and he seemed to be laboring under a hard attack of nervous agitation.

"Sorry to have harmed the Greasers, but I could not get around it," Iron-Nerve remarked, as he lit a cigar.

"No consequence. State your business!" Colonel Wetherill rejoined coldly.

"Correct. I just dropped down into this country lately, and while at a camp up here I came across a reward-notice with your name at the bottom of it."

"Well?"

"Well, being without much to occupy my time at present, I thought I'd run down and see what terms we could come to in the matter."

"None, sir. The mystery of the dragon cannot be solved, or else it would have been long before this."

"Pshaw! you've never had the right galoot at the reins."

"Have you seen it?"

"I have. It paid a visit to the vicinity of my camp, up-prairie, last night."

"Well?"

"You'd sleep easier if the thing was laid, I hear?"

"Who told you so?"

"Heard so up at the camp."

The Nabob was silent for a moment.

"Yes, I'll admit that the accursed thing is the horror of my life," he finally said, hoarsely. "I can never know any peace of mind as long as it haunts the Elms and the surrounding country, as you may well suppose."

"Has any one ever been harmed by it?"

"Not to my knowledge, though dead men have been frequently found with no mark upon them to tell how they met their death."

"Humph! merely a coincidence, likely. The so styled Don Dragon, who rides upon the devilish-looking beast, you think is a dead man?"

"It has that appearance, I believe."

"Correct. I am of the same belief."

"Well, be brief with what you have to say!"

"I will. How much money is there in the job, from you, if I effectually lay this ghost, ghou, demon, or whatever it may be?"

"I offered five hundred dollars."

"That was more for the name of offering it than because you expected that any one would exert themselves to earn so paltry a sum. Do you know what I'll lay the dragon for?"

"You have a mouth."

"Well, I'll wager ten thousand dollars I can solve that mystery and corral Mr. Dragon within ten days."

It was something extraordinary for the colonel to do, but he laughed.

"There's not a man in this section but what's failed to capture the Devil Don and his dragon. Ask up in Pokerville, and be convinced."

"From a rough estimate, I should judge there isn't stamina enough in the whole crowd to scotch a rattler."

"Get them down on you and you'll likely think otherwise," with a slight sneer. "But I'll tell you what I will do. You seem to have a great amount of self-assurance, which is all well enough, providing you can back it. You mentioned wagering ten thousand that you can capture the Devil Don and his dragon within ten days. I'll bet you two to one you can not do it!"

"That is—twenty thousand against ten?"

"Exactly."

"It's a bargain. Are you ready?"

"As soon as necessary. To-night the marriage of my daughter will take place. If you will present yourself, after the ceremony, I will have a contract drawn up, and you can deposit your money in the hands of any one of my distinguished guests, and go to work."

"You will do the same?"

"If you require, although my reputation is good."

"I am not dealing with reputations, sir. But we can doubtless fix it all right. There is another thing important to know."

"Well?"

"Am I to have the freedom of the Elms in pursuing my investigations?"

"Certainly not. There is no connection between the case and my residence."

"On the contrary, I learn the dragon has been seen upon the turret-top at nights."

"Nonsense—positive nonsense. The stairway to the tower can only be reached by passing through my bed-chamber, and the door has been sealed ever since I have lived here!"

"Indeed! Who did you buy the Elms of?"

"A Mr. Thornton—but that has no bearing on the case. If you undertake the job, I cannot have you prying about my residence, for I am constantly entertaining distinguished guests, who would not care to be brought in contact with a man of your station in life!"

The handsome face of Iron-Nerve flushed a trifle, but he otherwise showed no offense at the thrust.

"I presume I might have the liberty of your grounds?" he said, sarcasm in his tone.

"Certainly, providing you remember your position, and keep yourself strictly to yourself. But, let me tell you, that you will eventually be more money in pocket by abandoning the venture, at the outset."

Iron-Nerve smiled.

"We shall see!" he said. "I do not propose to speculate with you alone, as there are others who would like to have the mystery ventilated. I will be on hand to-night at—"

"Ten o'clock."

"Very well. You'll have your servants apprised of my freedom about the exterior of the Elms, or there'll be more ears shot off."

"I'll see to it."

"Oh, yes, something I forgot. That was your daughter, inside?"

"Yes."

"She's going to marry the dude?"

"If you refer to Clinton Carmen, sir—yes. But, pardon me, what is a dude?"

"A half-jackass and a half-kangaroo, sir!"

"Mr. Carmen is a gentleman!"

"Is he? Oh! well, times change, and I suppose people do. I'm off, now. Good-evening, sir."

And leaping into the saddle, the sport galloped away down the drive, upon the back of his handsome black steed.

The Nabob watched him ride away with a peculiar expression of countenance.

"He's a strange fellow," he muttered. "I was startled at first sight of him. He must have money, to risk such a wager as he has. Capture the Devil Don, indeed! He is a wonderful man if he can do that. Pshaw! he's mad. The failure of others ought to be enough to satisfy him."

But, let him go. I'll be ten thousand dollars richer by the business."

"Has he gone?"

Carmen ventured out upon the veranda, with furious bluster, just then, well knowing that the Sport had gone.

"Of course he has gone!" the colonel remarked. "Why, were you afraid of him?"

"Not at all, my dear colonel. I am surprised that you do not know me better. Who is the fellow, anyway?" he demanded.

"A hard customer. Calls himself Iron-Nerve."

"He should change his name to Brazen Face. Why, do you know, colonel, the impudent scoundrel actually called me a puppy, sir—just think of it, a puppy!"

"He did?"

"He did; and more, he called me a dude. Do you know what a dude is, colonel?"

"I believe it's a new-fangled definition for a combination of ninny and ass, Carmen."

The deuce you say! Worse and worse. I am insulted. By my soul, he shall pay for this with his life. Colonel, I appoint you to carry a challenge to him."

Wetherill looked disgusted.

"Don't be a fool, Carmen. The fellow'd kill you while you were winking. You go in the house and prepare for to-night. I'll attend to the insult."

"No! no! don't you dare! The blue blood of my ancestors burns in my veins. I will have him on his knees, or take his life. Not to-night, maybe, but at another time!"

And he bobbed into the house again, in high dudgeon, while the colonel sauntered away toward the stables.

"Iron-Nerve will come at ten to-night," he mused, "and he—he will not go back to Pokerville with ten thousand dollars. I'll fix the contract; then, after it is signed, something else will have to be done. I hope Carmen, the idiot, will not throw himself in the fellow's way. The example in the parlor is ample evidence of the fact that the name, Iron-Nerve, fits him well. He certainly means business."

CHAPTER IV.

THE STREET DUEL—"IT IS A DEVIL."

To say that there was excitement in Pokerville, just about the time of the startling accident to Scorpion Sam, would be "drawing it mild."

The bystanders shouted and swore, and some even ran swiftly in pursuit of the white steed, which was making off up the gulch at a swift gallop, still holding Sam in his powerful jaws.

'Liza Jane, hearing the commotion, dashed out of the post-office, and one glance sufficed for her to comprehend the situation.

"Stop yer hoss! stop yer hoss, Jane, or Sam will be killed," several of the Scorpion's cronies yelled.

"Do him good, the brute!" was the Girl Miner's retort. "He'll know better'n to go meddlin' wi' my hoss next time, eh, parson?"

Priggins's face was pale and anxious, he evidently fearing that he was the direct cause of the bully's death.

"Stop the horse, Miss 'Liza?" he entreated; "it's all my fault. I knocked the fellow down, and then the horse pitched at him."

"Little Sunday-school trick, that, what I learned Thunderbolt myself!" and 'Liza Jane actually laughed heartily.

She then put two fingers to her lips and gave a shrill call, which echoed and re-echoed along the walls of the gulch.

The effect was magical; for the horse spun around upon his hind feet, as if worked by mechanism, but still held Scorpion Sam, swaying to and fro.

Then the sagacious animal came trotting back, now and then shaking its head, spitefully, with the evident purpose of giving the Scorpion an extra stirring-up.

He finally paused, and at a motion from 'Liza Jane, dropped the terrified ruffian near where he had fallen.

Sam gradually gathered himself up into a standing position, and glared from one to the other in a dazed way, as if at loss how to begin to express his injured feelings.

"Well, what's the matter, Sammy?" the Girl Miner asked. "Been foolin' around my Arabian, ag'in, have ye? How often have I told ye that he wouldn't hev no one fussin' around him?"

"Cuss yer picter, I wasn't doin' nothin' to the hoss—leave it to the boys ef I was," Sam belated. "I war jest waltzin' up'er shake hands wi' the stranger, thar, an' welcum him ter our

camp, when he up an' hit me a Waterloo right plum in the eye, an' I stubbed my toe an' fell. Then yer cussed beast gobbled me up, an' made off."

"Certainly. Served you right. Next time a stranger comes to town, you'll know enough to let him alone, eh?"

"Wull I? Guess ye don't know who I am, do yer, gal?"

"Yes, I do, right 'cute, Sam Sligo, an' more'n that, I reckon you an' every other galoot in Pokerville knows who and what I am," the girl retorted, fiercely. "I'm just the argument as says I ain't afeard o' forty wild-cats!"

The declaration seemed to carry weight, for a murmur of assent was heard on either hand, which by no means lessened the Scorpion's ferocious scowl.

'Liza Jane had been located in the gulch only a season; but she was a daily visitor to the camp, and had demonstrated on more than one occasion that she was not only able to take care of herself, but was equally able to take care of any enemy who offended her.

By the majority of the Pokervillians she was regarded with a sort of awe, because of her reckless nerve, as they expressed it, in dwelling in the dragon-haunted gulch, and no other man than brutal Scorpion Sam would have thought of angering her, without first considering the consequences.

The Scorpion, however, while secretly fearing her, had boasted contemptuously that any man as would weaken to a young woman was beneath his notice, and that he would in time illustrate that 'Liza Jane was more bark than bite.

"So ye ain't afeard o' me, hey?" he roared, "me, whose hoss-power is more'n forty-leven wild-cats?"

"No; I am not afraid of you!" was the reply.

"You're a big, overgrown, good-for-nothing loafer, and can't scare me, if you can others. You're more, Sam Sligo—you're a hang-dog villain. Ever since I located up the gulch, you've tried to injure me by hinting various unsavory things of me. You've tried to turn the people against me. You've done all you could to create an unfavorable and suspicious impression of me. I hurl it in your teeth, you dog—you dare not deny it!"

The Scorpion's face reddened, and a malicious gleam entered his vicious eyes.

"Reckon every one's a right to his own opinion," he growled, with a wink at his pals. "'Tain't 'cordin' ter reason that ye'r a saint, nohow. Guess every one allows ye ain't gittin' rich out o' thet claim; an' no one w'd live in Dragon Gulch what hadn't some secret reason hid thar. Fact is, gal, ye'r rather a 'spicious character, an' ther fellers aire 'bout 'greed that it's fair that ye 'splain several things!"

"What?"

The Girl Miner's eyes glittered like diamonds as she looked him in the face.

"Oh! it don't matter jest now; we'll settle that some other time. Dragons an' sich like kin be tolerated, but thar's them as 'spects as how a 'spiration might a tale unfold. A gal stayin' ail alone in sech a place ain't accordin' ter the laws o' nateral history, an' we law-abidin' citizens don't keer about livin' in ther neighborhood o' kerrickers whose exact bizness standin' ain't known. Mr.—"

"Stop!" 'Liza Jane interrupted, in a ringing voice; "you need not mention Henry Wetherill as being largely interested in turning popular opinion against me. It is an open fact that he is my bitterest enemy, and is unscrupulously using every effort in his power to rid this vicinity of my presence. His secret, for all this, he is too cunning to give even to you who are his tools. Ha! ha! serve him if you like. I defy you all."

She shook her clinched little fist under the bully's blooming nasal appendage, and turned toward her horse, but the ruffian pushed her back.

"Stand aside, gal; don't be in a hurry. Allowin' ye're right, and all squerect, thar's somethin' else that ain't settled!"

"What?" and her hand dropped mechanically to the revolver in her belt. "Just please explain what isn't settled!"

"Waal, ye see," Scorpion Sam went on, "I'm calculated to be ther mayor o' this hyer city, an' am tharfore a personage to whom much respect is naterally due. I don't mind gittin' carved up a leetle onc't in a while, but when a feller slugs me betune the eyes, like as if he war goin' to sp'ile my entire landscape, ye kin jest bet yer boots that aire very stool-pigeon has gotter 'pologize or fight."

And the bully glared at Parson Jim.

'Liza Jane also turned toward him, to note that his face expressed not the least concern.

"You hear, parson?" she said. "The delectable, sweet-scented Sam'l demands an apology. Can you accommodate him?"

For reply the young man slid from the back of his burro to the ground.

"I presume so," he said. "What way shall it be, mayor?"

"What—wh—!" Sam blustered.

"How will you have it?" Priggins demanded, "the satisfaction you desire. Shall I administer it straight from the shoulder, or will you have it by slicing, or in the leaden style?"

"Ye won't apologize, then?"

"Most assuredly not. I have nothing to apologize for, as I acted in self-defense. You must either fight or crawfish, you great, whisky-shop loafer!"

'Liza Jane was surprised.

Likewise was the crowd.

The meek expression had vanished from the parson's face, and it looked decidedly as if he intended to push the matter to a climax.

"You bet I'll fight!" Scorpion Sam growled, understanding at once that he could not bluff the stranger. "Clar away to the sides o' the street, boys, an' make a pistol-range. Ker-scat! but won't I do it up beauchiful fer this saint-manyfacturer!"

"Pistols, eh?" Priggins said. "Waal, I once shot a hen-hawk over at the Corners; guess I mought hit sech a mark as you be. Pardner, lend me one o' yer little guns."

"You bet!" 'Liza Jane assented. "Just you plug the tough right whar he lives, an' I'll buy ye a gold medal as big as a bar'l-head."

"Mebbe you'd better try it!" Scorpion Sam gritted, preparing for the duel. "If you don't swaller a heap o' yer slack, curse me ef I don't make a job fer the coroner."

"I'll take yer word for it, Sammy. Every one's dead loads afeard o' you!" and she laughed scornfully.

The crowd had been cleared to one side, and twenty paces marked off in the middle of the dusty street.

The two men then took their places without further ceremony.

The parson was a trifle flushed in the face, but otherwise perfectly cool.

Scorpion Sam, with his usual appearance of braggadocio, did not seem much alarmed.

"Get ready, gents, I will act for the parson in this funeral!" 'Liza Jane announced, as she took a commanding position.

"And if no one has any objections, I will act for the other man," a voice cried, and Iron-Nerve Nat rode up, mounted upon his ebony steed.

All eyes turned upon him in curious inquiry for an instant; then 'Liza Jane said:

"Very well, sir. Fair play's the word. Are you ready, parson?"

"All ready for the christening!" was the reply.

"And you, Scorpion?"

"Ready fer the funeral!" he bawled.

"Very good. Now let us understand the conditions. Are either of you desirous of turning up your toes?"

A grim silence answered.

"Very well again," the Girl Miner added. "You will therefore fire but one shot apiece. The one who pegs out will not be taxed extra fer an obituary. Ready! At the word *three* let 'er flicker!"

The duelists raised their weapons to a level, and took what appeared to be deliberate aim.

"One!"

"Two!"

"Three!" shouted 'Liza Jane.

Crack!

Both weapons spoke simultaneously.

Neither man dropped.

The parson stood wiping a tiny bead of blood from the side of his face, caused by the wind of the bullet.

Scorpion Sam, however, with his right hand clasped to his left elbow, was dancing about frantically and howling at the top of his voice.

"Oh, jumpin' Jehosephat! Oh! oh! oh! my crazy-bone! my crazy-bone!" he yelled, for the bullet from the parson's weapon had struck that sensitive place upon the elbow commonly designated as the crazy-bone.

The crowd roared with laughter, which so infuriated the ruffian that, forgetting his pain in his rage, he raised his revolver and proceeded to pour a volley into their midst, thereby scattering them promiscuously.

Parson Jim, however, and the two seconds kept their places, and when the bully ceased firing 'Liza Jane called out:

"Time! Hev you got enough, Scorpion?"

"Fer to-day!" was the grim answer. "I'll see ye all later." And with that he shuffled off toward the "Four Aces."

"Put up your pop, parson," 'Liza Jane ordered: "the blizzard aire over for the present. I guess we'd better go take a drap o' suthin' and then light out."

"What! You don't drink?" Priggins gasped.

"Sartin! Lemonade wi' a stick in it, occasionally. Every one has to take a drap now an' then ter keep off the chills. Don't you drink?"

"Thun— Jerusalem, no! Never got tight but once; then 'twas on hard cider, at a loggin' bee."

"Oh, well, you can take a little mountain dew fer yours. That's not hurtful. Join us, stranger?"

And she spoke to Iron-Nerve, who had dismounted.

"Thank you," he politely assented, and the trio walked toward the Four Aces, the Girl Miner motioning for the crowd to follow. "I seldom imbibe, lady, but will wash down our acquaintance this time."

"This is Parson Priggins, a tenderfoot from Monte-peel-ye," 'Liza Jane explained, as they approached the gaming palace. "As fer myself, I'm a pepper-pod, by name 'Liza Jane."

"And I am known as Iron-Nerve Nat sometimes Iron-Nerve for short."

They then entered the place, and 'Liza Jane ordered Hemlock Harry to set up the drinks for the crowd.

Scorpion Sam had just "downed" a "hummer," and was grimly leaning against the bar.

"Have a pull, Sammy?" the Girl Miner asked. "This is prime old stuff Harry keeps."

"You go to thunder!" the bully growled, turning away. "I don't drink wi' enemies, by any means."

No notice was taken of this bluff, and he directly left the room.

'Liza Jane and Iron-Nerve stood chatting for a few minutes, seeming to have taken a liking to each other.

Finally Iron-Nerve remarked:

"If you've nothing more pressing, let's have a game of cards."

'Liza Jane glanced at her elegant gold watch and shook her head.

"You will excuse me," she said, "but we must be off for the Elms. It is already getting dark."

Iron Nerve started.

"Excuse me," he said, "but might I inquire the nature of your errand there?"

"Certainly. This gentleman, Mr. Priggins, is a relative of the Wetherills, and he being a stranger hereabouts I ventured to act as his guide. Come, parson, we will be off."

And without giving Iron-Nerve further opportunity for questioning, the Girl Miner bowed herself out of his presence, and she and the parson quitted the gambling palace, followed by more than one curious glance.

Iron-Nerve noted this fact, as he seated himself at a table.

"Here's a likely girl, occupying rather a questionable position," he mused, listening to the clinking of glasses, and other sounds in the room. "A miner, I judge, yet something about her indicates that she's too shrewd to adopt such a life without some other motive than money. Queer, what ideas will get into a fellow's mind. Well, anyhow, the Girl Miner is a beauty, and I'll try to keep her acquaintance, if nothing more, to drive away the blues. Heigh ho! I wonder what will be the result of my dragon venture? It will be a devil, indeed, if I fail to fetch it to time!"

"It is a devil!"

The words came to his ear, in a shrill whisper. With an exclamation, he leaped to his feet, and glared about him.

No one was looking at him—no one was standing within a dozen feet of him.

What infernal mystery was this?

That was what he wonderingly asked himself, over and over.

CHAPTER V.

A NIGHT OF SURPRISES.

THE Elms was literally a blaze of light.

Almost every window in the grim structure, was lit with wax candles, and wreathed and festooned with evergreens.

The great arched doorway and the veranda were similarly served, while from the branches of many a tree in the stately park, were suspended myriads of Chinese lanterns.

No expense had been spared by Colonel Wetherill to make the event of his daughter's marriage one long to be remembered.

As many of the citizens, miners, and ranchmen had been invited, numerous tables were out on the lawn, and Chinese waiters glided about to furnish the guests with fruit and drinks.

A military band had also been secured, from the fort, and the delightful strains of music upon the summer's night air, were intoxicating and enlivening.

Within the mansion the more cultured element was assembled, the majority being composed of the colonel's guests, only a limited few of prominent Pokervillians and their wives, having been asked to the ceremony.

The three grand communicating parlors, with their dazzling lights and handsome furnishings were thrown into one vast apartment, and with the well-dressed guests promenading to and fro, looked not unlike the reception hall of a veritable palace.

The colonel's guests were people of distinction, who evidently occupied high social and official positions, there being officers of the army and a sprinkling of statesmen present—all of whom seemed to enjoy the fullest benefit of Henry Wetherill's hospitality.

The colonel, himself, nervously paced up and down the parlors, his face flushed and his manner excited; yet, he assumed an unusually pleasant mood.

It was already time for the ceremony and the guests became seated.

Outside, the band was playing a wedding march, and the hilarity of the outer guests awoke the birds in the branches of the elms.

Colonel Wetherill stepped from the parlor, a few minutes later; then returned, followed by "the Squire" ruddy-faced, and benignly smiling.

He was a meek-looking little man, with startling red hair and whiskers, and a game eye. The book he held in his hand, looked as if it had served in Noah's time.

The bride-elect soon thereafter entered, upon her father's arm, while Clinton Carmen followed, accompanied by his best man; after whom came a number of groomsmen and maids.

The rear parlors had been elaborately decorated and arranged for the ceremony, and here the bridal couple took their places.

An open window, of large size, looked out at the left, upon a stretch of lawn that intervened between the dwelling and the lakelet, and this was open, admitting a fresh, flower-scented breeze from the plains beyond.

The bride was attired in a magnificent white wedding costume, which had been imported at a great cost, and wore some rare jewels. The groom was also elegantly dressed, and looked as if he had quite exhausted the tailor's art.

A faint flutter was observable among the spectators, as the insignificant-looking little 'Squire took his position, book in hand.

But the ceremony was destined not to proceed, yet, for into the parlor strode no less a personage than Parson Jim Priggins, who approached Colonel Wetherill.

"Waal, by gum!" he ejaculated, putting forth his hand; "how do yeow do, Uncle Hank? Gosh hang it, shake! Hain't seen ye since ye used ter run the grist-mill in Snake Hollow, up in New Hampshire. 'Scuse me fer interruptin' the ceremony, but I'm gosh all-fired glad to see ye."

"Sir!" Wetherill cried, drawing back. "Are you mad, man?"

"Dog-gone it, no! I'm yer nephey, Jim Priggins, an' ye know it. So don't go to lettin' on that ye *don't* know it. I don't keer a durned ef ye aire rich an' stuck-up; ye can't go back on yer blood relations. Say, 'Squire, you *git*! I'm a reg'lar ordained preacher, an' I'm goin' to do this splicin' bizness fer my own cousin, thar, sure's you're born!"

"This is a disgrace and an outrage," the colonel cried. "Ladies and gentlemen, if you will kindly have patience, we will summarily dispose of this lout."

"You will, will ye!" Priggins retorted, his face flushing and his eyes gleaming, while he whipped a pair of revolvers from his pocket. "Now see here, folks; I don't want to turn this blessed weddin' inter a funeral, but that's what I'll do, ef ye try to come it too pormisc'us over me. Uncle Hank, ye might as well give in. I kim out here a-visitin', and since I got here in time fer the weddin', why I'm goin' ter hev the job, hey? I know ye don't want—"

"Enough!" the Nabob interrupted, his face white and red by turns. "I recognize you, sir. Ladies and gentlemen, this a nephew of mine. James, you are at liberty to perform the marriage service. 'Squire, you are excused!"

The colonel's words were icily spoken.

No one could doubt but what he was in a great rage, which he was forcibly smothering.

"Beg pardon, colonel," the Squire interposed, "but would it not be well, to be positive that your relative is properly qualified to marry the couple?"

"Leave the room, sir!" Wetherill thundered. "His word is sufficient!"

The red-headed little individual, thoroughly horrified, scooted away with so much alacrity, as to cause a titter of laughter.

The colonel, his manner so wonderfully changed, then turned blandly to the man from New Hampshire, upon whose face was a placid smile.

He then introduced the parson to Carmen and Theo, and the parson took out his book.

A hush prevailed, when Priggins cleared his throat, and began to read the marriage service.

His countrified manner had for the moment vanished, and in a deep, impressive voice he proceeded with his task.

He had got as far as asking:

"Has any man or woman aught to say why these two people before me, shall not be joined in the banns of holy wedlock—?"

When suddenly there was an ear-piercing, blood-curdling shriek!

It was more the shriek of some demoniac monster, than that of a human being—it fairly stilled the blood of those who heard it!

All eyes, instinctively, turned toward the open window, and there beheld a sight that rendered them powerless, speechless—dumb with awful terror!

Upon the lawn, near the window, was the Devil Don and the Dragon!

Yes, the devilish-looking, fiery-eyed, flaming-mouthed, winged crocodile, and upon its back the white-robed, white-haired corpse-like figure of a man, whose eyes were closed and whose hands, which were crossed upon the breast, were those of a skeleton!

It was a horrible spectacle, which must have caused the bravest heart to quail, and around the fearful thing, apparition, or whatever it was, there was shed by some unseen power, a greenish halo of light, which, with bolts of flame that leaped from the dragon's eyes and distended jaws, made the spectacle even more weirdly infernal.

Theo Wetherill saw it among the first, and fainted dead away, and so paralyzed with terror was Clinton Carmen, that he allowed her to fall, heavily to the floor.

The others remained equally like statues, for several moments, and only when they were conscious that the spectacle was gone, did they recover from the shock, Wetherill and the parson recovering first.

"Curses seize the infernal thing!" the Nabob gasped, advancing to the window, and pulling down the curtains. "Ring yonder bell, Priggins, and order water."

The parson obeyed.

Several of the ladies had fainted, and for half an hour the excitement was terrible.

Soliciting Priggins's assistance, however, the colonel finally got matters somewhat quieted down, among his guests.

As none of those on the lawn, in front of the house had seen the dragon, no report of the affair was allowed to disturb their hilarity.

Wetherill explained all that was known about the monster, and then, urging his guests to have no further fear of it, he proposed that the wedding should be consummated, so Theo having recovered, the bridal couple again took their places, Priggins proceeded once more, and finally pronounced them man and wife.

The words had scarcely been spoken and the congratulations made, when a door opened, and Iron-Nerve Nat stalked into the room!

The sight of him caused the colonel to utter an exclamation, while Clinton Carmen smothered an oath.

"Colonel Wetherill, I am here!" the Sport said, in his clear tone, which penetrated every part of the room. "Are you ready?"

"I am, sir! Ladies and gentlemen, you will excuse me, but I have a little business matter to arrange."

"It can be done here, before witnesses," Iron-Nerve announced, coolly, as he saw it was the Nabob's purpose to leave the room. "In fact, I choose to have it done here!"

"Very well, sir," Wetherill assented, biting his lip with vexation. "But, pray, sir, how came you by these scratches upon your face?"—for the Sport's handsome face was somewhat bloody, from a couple of trifling cuts upon it.

"Perhaps if you traverse the distance 'twixt here and Pokerville, you will not need to inquire?" Iron-Nerve said, dryly.

"However, I will explain, that while on my way here, I was pounced upon by a brace of fellows, who wanted my money or my life. As I couldn't conveniently spare either, just at present, I shot the one and knifed the other. I got the scratches in the struggle."

"Served the rascals right, sir," the Nabob said, briefly. "Now, how about the contract?"

"None is necessary. Put up your money—I will do the same."

"But the stakeholder?"

"Your relative, thar, Parson Priggins. He will fill the bill!"

"I am afraid not. Thirty thousand dollars is a large sum to intrust in any man's hands!" Wetherill sneered.

"I presume some of your honorable guests will feel elated at your bewildering trust in mankind!" Iron-Nerve suggested, dryly.

"Oh! no—no; I made no reference to my guests!" the Nabob stammered.

"See heer, uncle Hank, ain't I a minister, an' every inch as good as any one o' yer guests?" Priggins demanded, advancing toward the colonel threateningly. "I want ye to know I don't knock under to no one. I'll hold them stakes, jest as t'other feller said. I'm honest as the pendulum ov a clock!"

"You'll hold the stakes?" Wetherill gritted, his face flaming with baffled malice.

"I'll hold the stakes, an' do it squar'!" was the emphatic reply, given in a way which pretty plainly signified that the parson proposed to have his way in the matter.

"Very well!" assented the Nabob, but in a manner that betrayed his wish to throttle his nephew then and there.

He turned to the guests, then, with a face wonderfully calm.

"Excuse me, pray," he remarked, "but I will explain what may seem strange to you all. It concerns you somewhat, too."

"To begin with, this character, calling himself Iron-Nerve—a way of creating a big impression, these odd titles—came to me a few hours ago. He is a perfect stranger to me, but evidently having heard of the several failures to capture the dragon, he proposed to bet me ten thousand dollars against an equal amount—"

"Beg pardon!" Iron-Nerve interrupted. "You offered to bet me twenty against ten!"

"Well, I was getting to that!" the colonel scowled. "The man bets me ten thousand dollars he can capture the dragon within ten days. Since he seems so flush, and as it is worth a great deal to my peace of mind to have the capture made, I have agreed to put twenty thousand dollars against his ten. If he succeeds, Priggins is to give him the thirty thousand. Otherwise, it is mine. The ten days begin at midnight tonight. Is this correct, sir?"

"I believe so. Have you your money, sir?"

"I will write you a check in a moment."

"That will not do. It is the cash I want to see put up."

Wetherill frowned. How often, that evening, had his will been baffled!

He was wondering what opinion his guests were beginning to form of him.

"You are devilish particular!" he growled. "My check is as good as the U. S. mint."

"Not to me. I have here ten one-thousand-dollar notes ready to put up," the Sport said, grimly, as he took a neat roll from his vest-pocket. "If you haven't the amount, perhaps some of your friends can lend you the balance."

And Iron-Nerve sneered in the blandest manner, which thoroughly infuriated the colonel.

"Curse your impudence!" he roared, "I have money enough to buy you, heart and soul, and I'll bet you fifty thousand to ten you cannot capture the Devil Don and his dragon!"

He rushed from the parlor, but soon returned, and placed a large roll of bills in Priggins's hands.

"Count 'em!" he commanded, sententiously. "Fifty thousand dollars!" cried the parson a moment later.

"Correct! Cover them, Mister Iron-Nerve, and then rid us of your presence."

The Sport bowed and handed his money to the parson.

"Now begone!" Wetherill ordered.

"Not jest yit, me mutton!" a voice cried, and Scorpion Sam, together with a number of Wetherill's rancheros, marched into the room. "We want that sardine, Iron-Nerve, fer murder in the first degree!"

CHAPTER VI.

WHAT WAS THE SECRET?

THE sensation caused by the sudden appearance of the rancheros and Scorpion Sam, and

the demand of the latter, caused a profound sensation in the bridal parlor.

Even Iron-Nerve was for the instant astonished; but, quick to think, he in the same instant drew the conclusion that the bodies of his two assailants had been found, and he threw himself on the defensive by drawing and cocking his two revolvers.

"Do you want me *very* bad?" he called out, placing his back against the window-sill, knowing the sash was raised although the curtains were down—a fact that none of the others appeared to remember.

"Well we jist about do that!" Scorpion Sam averred. "Yer a mighty good-lukin' feller, as all will allow, an' mebbe kin skeer sum folks, but when ye cum in these parts to shute folks jest as ye please, we take it you're wrong!"

"You found the two ruffians twixt here and Pokerville?"

"They weren't no roughs. They war respectable ranchmen, as tuk their toddy straight every time, you bet!"

"Oh! were they? Well, they got it straight when they tried to rob me. I ain't accommodating the whims of strolling footpads as much as I used to be!"

And the Sport showed his pearly teeth in a defiant smile.

"They didn't try ter rob ye. They war goin' back to camp, an' ye shot 'em down like dogs!"

"You lie like a thief!" Iron-Nerve retorted.

"Mr. Wetherill, I believe, can make an explanation to you in regard to the matter!"

"How am I to know but what you have lied to me?" the colonel replied, coldly. "It is not in my line of business to defend criminals."

"Does any one know *what* your line of business is, anyhow?" the Sport asked, significantly; then he added: "I didn't mention employing you to defend me. Indeed, you'd be working against yourself in doing so, both pecuniarily and otherwise."

"The cunnel hain't got no say in this, no-how!" Scorpion Sam spoke up. "We're the lads. These fellers aire pards o' Stokes an' Steel, w'ot ye killed, an' they perpose ter inwite ye ter a little neck-tie party. Thar's no use o' kickin'; killin' is murder, an' murder is punishable accordin' tew the laws o' hemp. So surrender, wi'out parley!"

Iron Nerve looked the crowd over, with a defiant smile.

"Twelve of you, eh?" he said. "Mr. Wetherill, have you boards enough about the premises to make stretchers out of, on which to carry these fools back to their homes?"

"No, sir. I wash my hands of the matter. If they choose to hang you, it's none o' my business. You had better surrender!"

"When I do, it will be when these beautiful carpets are dyed red with human blood, sir. I am not the man to be taken without resistance!" was the defiant assurance.

"No, don't spile the carpets, uncle," put in Parson Priggins. "It's not right to hang a mortal, so order those fellows away!"

"What! you dictate to me?" Wetherill yelled, growing livid with rage. "You have done too much of this—"

"Calmly, calmly, uncle! Don't never exasperate a preacher, for he who teacheth that which is good, hath a power—"

"Hell and furies seize you!" the colonel roared. "Men, leave this house, and leave the Sport alone. He will be glad to die soon enough!"

"The colonel knows best!" one of the ranchmen said. "We'll abide by what he says. If Scorpion Sam wants vengeance, let him git it himself!"

The speech seemed to change the minds of the party, and they filed from the room, the baffled bully following, growling.

When they were gone, Iron-Nerve crossed over to the side of Parson Priggins, and seized him by the hand.

"My friend, I thank you for saving me the trouble of spilling blood on these carpets," he said, with a grim laugh. "I am glad to see you have power here; but, look out. These walls contain hidden assassins. I clipped the ears of a pair of 'em during a previous visit today. Remember—wide-awake."

He then turned to the colonel.

"I'll now bid you good-evening. Sorry if anything has proved unpleasant, through my fault."

Then, tipping his sombrero, to the assembled guests, he backed from the room.

He did not choose to make his exit otherwise, for his gaze had caught a snaky gleam in the eyes of the Nabob, which was the quintessence of rancorous evil.

Once in the hall, the Sport made his way boldly from the house, and joined the crowd of half-tipsy revelers upon the lawn.

It is unnecessary to state that his eyes roved searchingly about, and that he expected an attack.

But none was made.

Scorpion Sam was nowhere to be seen, and among the revelers, the Sport saw none whom he recognized as having been in the would-be lynching party.

Concluding that there was no further use for him about the Elms that night, he returned to Pokerville, and turned in at the Demijohn for the night, as he was pretty well fatigued.

And now let us return to the Elms.

The festivities on the lawn were continued until a late hour; but within, the guests finally wearied, and retired to their apartments, or homes, as the case might be.

If Colonel Wetherill had surmised, privately, that the events of the evening had excited a deal of curiosity among his friends and visitors, he was not wrong; for both the Pokervillians and his own guests, now had good cause to suspect that Colonel Henry Wetherill was not what he usually appeared to the world.

In the first place, he was by nature a strong-willed man, who would never give up a point unless for a most powerful reason.

In the second place, the marriage of Theo to Carmen evidently was not a union of hearts—it was a bargain between stately, stony beauty and mammon, in which Carmen and the colonel seemed most interested.

In the third place, the colonel, with his iron will, had some *secret*—else why did he yield so many times to the benign-faced man from Montpelier—the redoubtable Jim Priggins, and why did he shield the stranger Sport?

As soon as the guests began to depart, Colonel Wetherill suddenly began to look around for the parson, for it was by no means his intention to let that worthy leave the Elms, with the wager money; but Parson Jim was gone, and a search failed to find him.

At last the guests had all retired, and the house was shorn of its gayety, though the festivities still continued on the lawn; for as the colonel had made no stint in furnishing liquors, the outside revelers were evidently disposed to "make a night of it."

In the grand parlor, however, three persons still lingered.

The colonel sat at the table in a reverie.

Carmen was lounging upon a sofa, smoking a cigar and looking satisfied.

Theo sat in a great easy-chair, apart from the rest, staring into vacancy, while she tapped her tiny foot upon the plush carpet, as if she were impatient.

She was evidently undergoing several changes of mood; for now her face would wear that cold stony expression; then, it would soften, and her eyes would warm up gloriously, transforming her completely into another type of beauty.

The voice of Carmen brought the cold, hard expression back to her face.

"By the way, colonel, it has been a devilish odd wedding night. In 'Frisco, such proceedings would create a lasting sensation. Who in thunder is Priggins?"

"I believe you heard him introduced," he replied dryly.

"Humph! then he is really your nephew?"

"Yes. I wish he were not!"

"He has a secret of yours?"

"How do you know?"

"A key don't turn in a rusty lock, generally, without a good deal of power!" was the answer.

"Right you are. I didn't know him at first. He had his own way, and I couldn't help myself. Do you think others noticed it?"

"I didn't observe any blind people in the assemblage!" Carmen answered significantly.

Wetherill gritted his teeth.

Theo had been watching—listening.

"What is this secret, papa?" she asked.

"Nothing for you to know!" was the tart reply, at which Theo flushed, while Carmen laughed quietly.

"Your father is right, peerless. The wife should never meddle with the business affairs of the head of the house!"

"Indeed!" was the cold answer.

"There's another thing," Carmen went on, addressing the colonel, "that you deserve censure for—letting that Sport escape. Why didn't you permit the fellows to lynch him, and you would not only have ridded me of an enemy, but you would also have been ahead a clear ten thousand."

"My father is not in the habit of making his money by giving up other people's lives, sir!" Theo interrupted spiritedly.

"Oh! no—no! Of course not!" Carmen apologized, seeing he had stirred up a slumbering hornet. "By the way, to change the subject—if you have those papers ready, we might as well sign them. I am anxious for the privilege of saying I am a partner in this beautiful home, and we will begin life under the happiest auspices. Eh! colonel, old boy?"

Wetherill did not notice the other's familiarity.

"The deeds are ready, but cannot well be signed to-night?" was his answer.

"Why not, pray?"

"Because *you are not legally married!*"

Clinton Carmen sprung to his feet, while Theo gave such a sigh of relief that both men gazed at her in a startled way, and noted that her cheeks were rose-tinted, and her whole expression was that of exultation!

"You seem overjoyed!" Carmen sneered.

"Did I address you?" she answered haughtily; and the next instant she swept from the room, with the bearing of an offended queen.

Carmen, furious with passion, would have followed, only that the colonel waved him back.

"Stop, you jealous fool!" he ordered.

"Go on! explain yourself," the other gritted, pacing up and down the carpet, his fury held in check, but not abated.

"Well, I don't see what ails you. Supposing she did manifest a little joy at a reprieve. It's but maidenly. Then, too, you ought to know she isn't dead in love with you, when she told you so yesterday."

"Bah! go on—about the marriage?"

"Simple enough. Priggins had no right to perform a ceremony?"

"Who is he? What is he?"

"A bad person to deal with. He is a detective with more aliases than a sneak-thief. He's been after me for years. I last heard of him in Oregon, as being dead. Fancy my surprise, then, to-night."

"What part of Oregon?" Carmen queried anxiously.

"Portland and vicinity."

"Humph! Well, let's send for the 'Squire at once, and make the thing sure!"

"Not to-night. To-morrow will do as well."

Carmen, for safety, two persons have got to be killed!"

"Priggins and the Sport?"

"Exactly; both without fail."

"The sooner, the better, to suit me!"

"Leave it to me. It shall be attended to at once—or as soon as possible!"

"And the wedding?"

"Afterward."

"Curse it, no. She will get all out of the notion."

"Bah! I am the master. Off to bed with you, now, and we'll have everything right. You will occupy your old apartment, but no one will be the wiser until all is settled."

"Why don't you settle that Girl Miner in the bargain, too—make a clean sweep of all the coyotes on the trail?"

"Not yet. Why do you fear her, Carmen? Have you a secret, too?"

"Bah! no. I hate the girl because she's too glib of tongue, and pokes fun at me."

"I have a stronger plea than that—but enough. If we tarry longer, day-dawn will be upon us. We'll knock the neck off a bottle of champagne, and then turn in."

The champagne was opened, and after emptying the bottle, they sought their respective apartments.

Parson Jim Priggins had quitted the Wetherill mansion about ten minutes before the colonel's discovery of his absence.

Skulking around to the rear of the premises, he found 'Liza Jane waiting at a place which they had previously agreed upon.

"Well?" she interrogated. "How's everything going off?"

"Very serenely, when I left," he answered.

"What luck did you have?"

"Very little. I went pretty well through the establishment, but failed to satisfy myself upon what I wanted to. Did you do as I bade you?"

"Yes. It will make the difference of only a few days, I reckon."

"Why, wasn't it satisfactory?"

"I know it wasn't to Henry Wetherill. Time will tell, however. Are you ready?"

"Yes. I must be getting back to my home."

"Are you not afraid?"

"Ha! ha! no. As we go, let's hear all that happened inside."

They shaped their route in a roundabout way, and 'Liza Jane took the parson's arm, as they walked along, while he proceeded to relate what had occurred.

"You have dropped your unpolished talk, I notice," the girl observed, keenly. "You also have control over Colonel Wetherill to some extent. You're a queer preacher!"

"Think so? Well, preachers are a queer set, often. Now, I suppose I cannot be considered one of your boarders, and shall have to stop in Pokerville."

"Certainly. It would be more proper."

"Well, then, here is a package. I want you to take it and keep it for ten days—let no one know you have it. Keep it carefully secreted. If I should peg out before the expiration of ten days, you are to deliver it to Iron-Nerve. It is the wager money, between Iron-Nerve and Wetherill—not thirty, but sixty thousand dollars; so look sharp!"

"Very well. I'll take good care of it. I'll see you again to-morrow, probably."

They parted as soon as they reached their horses, Priggins riding toward the heart of the camp, and 'Liza Jane toward her lone gulch cabin.

It was a dark and gloomy ride, but the Girl Miner paid no attention to this fact, her mind seeming occupied with other thoughts.

As she neared her cabin home, they found expression in words:

"I went there to-night but return with no more knowledge than when I went, except that one man has been baffled. He knows not that I am to be his destroyer. I fancy, however, that he has suspicions. It is not time to strike yet! I must strike like a Nemesis, when I do strike!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE NOCTURNAL VISITOR.

THE Demijohn at Pokerville, as we have before stated, was the principal hotel of the camp; in fact, it was the only one, barring a little one-story restaurant kept by a Jew.

Moreover, as the Demijohn was well-patronized it was well-kept, and its rubicund proprietor, the major, had made money there, to add to the board he was reputed to have stored away.

As the stages had no regular time for arrival at Pokerville, and were as liable to turn up in the dead of night as any other time, the Demijohn was an all-night house, the major generally staying up himself, but usually dozing off the better part of his time in his huge arm chair, which had been made especially to accommodate his unusual avoirdupois.

The major was up when Iron-Nerve reached the hotel, and the two took a "night-cap" together, after which the young Sport sought his room.

For a couple of hours more, an occasional straggler dropped in, until by the rapid multiplication of "night-caps," the major began to feel rather sleepy when the clock rattled off three A. M.

Concluding there was no liability of his being disturbed until daybreak, he settled down in his chair, and was soon in a doze—as virtually out of his cares as a living man could be.

The major was counted a square man, and was said to have a clear conscience, when it was not too much affected by drink.

Major Blood Bixby didn't consider himself a real drinking man by any means, but he "allowed" he could drink more bug-juice, without becoming fazed, than any other man in the camp.

The major had lately got smitten with a rich widow in Howlin' Bar, and he was complacently dreaming of her, when he felt some one pulling at his ruby-tinted nose, and started up with:

"Yas! yas! hot-Scotch—certainly! Strong one for four bits!"

But he stared, when he got the sleep partly rubbed out of his eyes.

"Why, bless my eyes—a woman!" he gasped. "Why, (hic) ma'am, what ye doin' out this late hour?"

For it was indeed a woman, clad in black from head to foot, and wearing a heavy black veil.

Whether young or old, it was hard to determine.

But she came down to business beautifully. She presented a revolver at the major, and said, in a deliciously musical voice:

"You are Mr. Bixby, sir?"

"Yes'm—Major Blood Bixby!"

"You keep this hotel?"

"Yes ma'am, I do! An' I keep her in bang-up style!"

"So I should judge, if you are a sample," the lady replied. "Have you a person stopping here named Nathan Norcross?"

"No, ma'am; but jest keep that pistol in yer pocket!"

"If you do as I bid, you'll not be harmed," was the answer. "You say no such party as Nathan Norcross is registered here?"

"Yes, I do!"

"How 'bout Iron-Nerve? Any such a party as that?"

"Ah! yes, I see—I see! Iron-Nerve. Ah! yes; he's in bed, long ago."

The lady took a wallet from her pocket, extracted a card from it, and gave it to the major, who read the name with manifest surprise.

"Sh! not a word! Never breathe that I was ever here!" the woman warned, laying her hand upon the major's arm. "Listen! I want to visit Iron-Nerve's room for about two minutes, providing I can do so without disturbing him from his slumbers. You shall accompany me, to see that I do him no evil. Remember, you must swear to always keep this matter a secret. Now, what is your price, for the trouble?"

The major was staring at her in open-mouthed astonishment.

"Why, bless your eyes, I've no right to enter the man's room!" he grunted. "Like to 'commodate ye, ma'am, but ye see it's out o' the question!"

The veiled lady stamped her foot.

"I say 'tis not! I merely wish to gaze once more upon the man's face. Here is a hundred dollars! Will that be any temptation?"

"No, ma'am. Come along, like a mice. Luv affair, I s'pose? Wanter see his face once more afore ye commit suicide, hey? Oh! I can read these tender sex like a book. Got a mash on a widder, myself, over in Howlin' Bar. She lets on she don't keer fer me, but she does—she's dead gone on my shape an' my genial thousands. Come right along!"

And the rubicund host of the Demijohn led the way through a hall and up a pair of stairs to the second floor. Here another hall ran transversely; a short distance down this Bixby passed a door to his left and listened.

"He's sleepin' like a burro, I reckon," he whispered. "Mind, now, disturb or harm him at your peril."

"Never fear," was the quiet answer.

The major then quietly opened the door, and the two tip-toed into the room, which was lighted by a bar of moonshine that poured in through the window.

The bed was so arranged that the moonlight streamed in upon the face and figure of the Sport—for he had, by force of habit, thrown himself upon the bed and dropped asleep, having only doffed his coat and vest, one of his hands resting upon the butt of a revolver in his belt.

He was breathing regularly, and as sound asleep as a person well could be, a peaceful expression resting upon his countenance.

The woman glided forward and knelt by the bedside, at the same time raising her veil and revealing a beautiful face that wore an expression of loving tenderness, as her gaze was bent upon the sleeper.

Old Blood Bixby gazed at the face of the woman curiously, marking her every expression, even though his night-capped eyes were hardly fully opened for business.

For a couple of moments the woman gazed steadfastly into the face of the Sport, as if she was trying to impress every feature indelibly upon her memory.

Then she motioned to the major.

"Can you roll up his shirt-sleeve on his left arm without disturbing him?" she whispered.

"Lordy, no! The least stir would arouse a man like him!" the major gasped, trembling in fear of having himself discovered as a participant in this mysterious nocturnal proceeding.

"Never mind—I can fix it," the woman replied, and drawing a pair of scissors from her pocket, she deliberately proceeded to cut a piece out of the Sport's white flannel shirt, near the elbow.

Prepared to make a dart out through the open door, should the sport awaken, old Blood Bixby stood looking on.

The deft fingers of the woman were not long in accomplishing the work, and when the patch of cloth was removed, a portion of Iron-Nerve's white arm was exposed to view.

Right where the cloth had been cut out was the scar of a former wound, which, from its

ragged outlines, must have been made by an arrow.

A stifled cry escaped the woman as she saw it, and she bent forward and kissed the scar softly.

She then arose, restored the scissors to her pocket, pulled down her veil, and signified her readiness to depart.

They left the bed-chamber and descended to the hotel office.

"I am very thankful for your kindness, sir," the woman said, "and I feel sure I can depend on your reticence."

"You bet; I'm the mummet man in the world!" the major reassured. "Going, eh? Well, so-along! But, hold! Won't ye hev an eye-opener before ye go?"

"No, thank you. Good-by."

And she was gone ere the major could follow her to the door.

"Blast these pesky women!" he muttered, taking his eye-opener alone. "They'r a bigger bother than a bootful o' snakes. Wonder what Iron-Nerve will say when he sees his shirt? Wish I'd taken the gal's money. Worth every cent of it, to lie out of this matter."

CHAPTER VIII.

DUMB DICK.

As soon as 'Liza Jane reached her shanty she turned Thunderbolt loose, knowing he would not go far, and bathing her flushed face at one of the sluice-boxes entered the cabin, which bore the same appearance as when she departed.

Lighting a lantern, she arranged the scanty furniture about in order, cleared away the dishes left from the evening meal, and swept the room out.

Next advancing to the southern wall of the cabin, where a profusion of dresses, blankets and skins were hung, she carefully put them aside.

As we stated previously, the cabin was built in the mouth of the ravine, which branched off from the main gulch. The southern end of the building, however, was against the precipitous cliff where the mighty walls of gulch and ravine met.

On pulling aside the clothing a low door was revealed.

Lantern in hand, the Girl Miner entered what proved to be a cave or subterranean chamber, with high ceiling and a floor area of at least fifty square yards.

It was by no means barren of comfort, although the walls were of rock, for a cheery fire burned near the center of the adamant floor, the smoke of which found escape through a crevice in the ceiling far above.

A rude table and a couple of stools were near the fire, as was also a rough cot-bed, covered with bear and buffalo skins.

Partly bolstered up on this bed was a young man, who looked up with an expression of gladness as 'Liza Jane approached and seated herself at the table.

He was evidently not over twenty-five years of age, and was attired in a coarse but serviceable suit.

His face and eyes were strikingly handsome, and his hair worn in a long wavy profusion down over his shoulders.

A graceful mustache adorned his lip, and a close observer would have noticed a little contraction of the left side of his face, from the mouth to the throat, that indicated paralysis.

His arms too were painfully drawn behind his back, as though bound there.

There was an intelligent expression about his face; there was a sorrowful look there too, but it partly vanished when 'Liza Jane entered.

"Poor Dick!" the girl said, placing the lantern upon the table and drawing her stool to his bedside, while her hand stroked his hair. "Have you been lonesome while I was away?"

He nodded, with a patient sort of smile.

It then became evident that he was powerless to speak.

"I have been to Pokerville and to the Elms," 'Liza Jane continued, watching him. "I didn't find out much, Dick, but I found out something. There's a man in Pokerville who is the perfect counterpart of you."

He looked surprised, excited, eager.

'Liza Jane was also eager, as she noticed his interest.

She went on, passionately:

"Oh, Dick! I believe everything will all come right yet. I pray to God that it will! Just a year ago to-night—do you remember it?—I found you, a starving maniac, in the mountains!"

He nodded, and tears of gratitude entered his eyes, which gazed up into her face lovingly.

"Yes, just a year ago to-night," the girl repeated. "I was a wanderer—desperate, wild. I had made up my mind to kill myself, but when I found you, a creature of God's creation, as miserable as myself, the Divine Spirit told me to live—live for you; that a terrible wrong had been done, and I could right it. I prayed for strength to help me, and it was granted. I took you in charge and labored over you. The result has been great. You are no longer demented, Dick—you haven't shown a symptom for a month."

He nodded. His piteously-grateful gaze never left her face.

Oh! could his lips have spoken the feelings of his heart, what gratitude and love for his faithful benefactor he would have poured forth!

"God has been good, and I know he will aid me in restoring you to perfect health and strength, and perhaps restoring your power of speech. Then, Dick, you can unravel all this mystery."

Once more he nodded eagerly.

"This counterpart of yours," 'Liza went on, "has come here and wagered ten thousand dollars he can capture the Devil Don and his dragon. I hope he can do it, but fear he cannot. Dick, do you know who this man is? He calls himself Iron-Nerve?"

The dumb invalid shook his head.

"Did you ever have a brother, Dick?"

He nodded in the affirmative.

"Is he living?"

A negative shake of the head.

"Are you positive?" 'Liza Jane asked.

He nodded in assent.

"Then, perhaps after all this man is in no way connected with our case. The resemblance may be merely a chance one. Have you thought over the name of Wetherill? Are you sure that that is not the name of your enemy?"

Once more he nodded in assent.

"Strange! strange!" the girl mused.

"I am inclined to think Henry Wetherill is the man, but that you knew him by a different name. Did you read the long list of names I wrote for you?"

He assented; then shook his head, to indicate his failure to find the name he wanted.

'Liza Jane had written upon the paper upward of two hundred different names, in hopes that he could find that of his enemy and indicate it to her.

From the time that 'Liza Jane had first taken the mute into her care, he had seemed restless, and when asked, had implied that he had an enemy, and it had been through his instrumentality that he had been stricken paralyzed and dumb.

Little by little the faithful girl had eked out such information by questioning him as led her to believe that some terrible crime was back of all the mystery.

After locating in the gulch, it was, she had heard the rumor that it was not known how Henry Wetherill came into possession of the Elms estate. This so aroused her suspicions that she at once set her heart upon the matter, and believed that Dick was connected with the case.

One day she had taken him over the mountain and pointed out to him the Elms, and his eyes lighted up with recognition.

To all her questioning, however, regarding what he knew about the estate or his past history, he remained literally 'mum,' shaking his head as if to deprecate all inquiry; yet a fierce gleam in his eyes on such occasions, satisfied 'Liza Jane that he did know much, but would not give it away—not at least until he could speak, and make everything clear.

The Girl Miner was silent, in deep meditation, for some time after her last query. Then she seated herself at the table and picked up the latest Eastern paper.

"It is the tenth of September," she said, aloud. "I sent off for the battery over a month ago. Strange it don't come. Once I get that, Dick, if a series of shocks won't bring you to rights, I am afraid you are doomed never to speak. I have confidence, however, that the battery, properly used, will help you."

Dick shook his head and smiled faintly.

He evidently did not have much faith in electricity.

"There was a wedding at the Elms to-night," 'Liza Jane said, a few minutes later, turning to the mute.

Then she uttered a low cry of surprise.

Dick was apparently fast asleep!

"That's funny. I never knew him to drop asleep so quick," she mused, listening to his

heavy breathing. "I guess I'll take a nap, too."

She re-entered the cabin, leaving the hidden door partly ajar, as was her usual custom.

Having no fear of being disturbed, and the night being unusually warm, she put up her hammock beneath the porch that covered the veranda and swung herself into it, for she felt the need of repose.

The musical dash of the water through the sluice-boxes, and the sighing of the breeze through pines in the glen, made a sort of restful symphony that soon lulled her to sleep.

She had been asleep perhaps half an hour, when a rabbit, which had been hopping about the cabin in search of crumbs suddenly took alarm and bounded away.

A footfall within the cabin had startled it.

An instant later a hatless figure stole out upon the veranda with the stealth of a cat.

It was Dumb Dick!

His eyes were closed; but he paused, as if listening.

A moment later he glided down the path into the gulch, and strode away toward Pokerville.

'Liza Jane had awakened the moment he came out on the veranda, and lying perfectly still, had noted that he was asleep.

"He is a somnambulist!" she mused.

"Ah! he goes toward Pokerville. Am I at last to learn something?"

She waited until he was fifty yards away; then, slipping from her hammock and seizing her rifle, she set out in pursuit.

CHAPTER IX.

THE ISLAND GRAVES AND A RESCUE.

THE sun was up, and the town had been astir a long time, when Iron-Nerve awoke the following morning.

Ashamed of his laziness, as he termed it—for he was usually an early riser—he sprung up and began to make his ablutions, preparatory to going down to breakfast.

"Nine o'clock," he mused, glancing at his watch. "I ought to have had a morning ride by this time. Hello! what's this?"

He was brushing his hair at the glass when he discovered the hole in his shirt-sleeve.

At first he was too much astonished to give further utterance, for it needed no critical examination to prove that the piece had been scissored out.

"Well, I'll be blamed!" he ejaculated, his face flushing. "That's about the cheekiest thing I've seen yet. I'll swear there was no piece cut out of this sleeve when I entered this hotel last night. It's taken out right where the scar is, which I got a couple of years ago. Humph! that recalls the event vividly to mind," and a grim, rather disappointed expression came over his face. "I had come down to Omaha with a load of pelts. When nearing the city I saw an Indian and a white man struggling with a girl, whom they had evidently surprised and were trying to abduct. I killed the devils and got the girl, but also received this wound. She was a school-girl—pretty Laura Leigh. I never found out much about her parents, as they did not live in Omaha, where she was attending school, but I found, after our third or fourth meeting, that I, a great, burly plainsman, was head over heels in love with the prettiest and most intelligent little lass in Omaha. Heigh ho! 'twas but a day's dream, though. When I considered myself the happiest cuss on the prairies, and, seeing her affectionate bearing toward me, was about to pop the momentous question, she suddenly disappeared, leaving behind this letter"—and he took a crumpled letter from his pocket—

"which seared my heart as a red-hot iron could not do. 'She thanked me for helping her to while away an occasional hour and gratifying her penchant for coquetry, but I must never think of her again; her station in life was immensely superior to mine, and she hoped I had not been foolish enough to make serious of our acquaintance; when she got home she'd implore the gov'nor to send me some money as a reward for rescuing her!' Gods! how I could have crushed her fair face had I had her then! I bid Omaha a very abrupt good-by then."

Passionately the Sport paced to and fro as he uttered the confession, seeming unaware that his thoughts were uttered in words.

His face was pale; his eyes gleamed strangely.

"Ah! about the shirt!" he said, directly. "I had nearly forgotten about it. Some one entered here, while I slept, and cut out the piece of cloth—more, they cut it out to see if that scar was on my arm!"

"Who did it? That's the question. Who formerly knew me, knew of the scar, and is here now, and enough interested in me to adopt the

stealthy method, in order to prove my identity? No friend, I'll swear! I'll wager old Bixby can throw some light on this matter, the infernal old rum-sucker. I'll see."

He finished his toilet, and was about to leave the room, when an object caught his attention which he had not seen before.

It was a lady's white handkerchief, of rare texture.

As the Sport hastily picked it up, the most deliciously peculiar perfume he had ever inhaled arose from it.

Examination failed to discover any name upon it, or other trace of ownership.

"I'll keep this," Iron-Nerve gasped. "Great God! can it be that I am to be again thrown in the way of false, heartless Laura Leigh?"

He rushed down-stairs, into the bar, to find the major behind it, waiting on a couple of miners.

"Ah! good-morning, Mr. Iron-Nerve. Glad to see you looking so fresh and rested," and the major's ruddy face glowed like an April sunbeam. "Step up, sir, and let's have an eye-opener."

"Thanks," Iron-Nerve replied. "My eyes are sufficiently opened already. By the way, major, is one of your attractions, at this hotel, ghosts?"

"Ghosts!" the major repeated, in evident astonishment, well knowing what was coming. "Why, bless your heart, no."

"Who has charge of the keys at night?"

"I do, sir, aside from those furnished each occupant of the rooms."

"Then, perhaps, you can explain the mystery of that?" Iron-Nerve said, thrusting forward his arm. "Some one entered my room, while I was asleep, and cut that piece out of my shirt!"

"The devil!" gasped the major.

"I can't say if 'twas he or not," Iron-Nerve returned, grimly, "but it was a devilish mean trick. Major, you know who did it!"

"I hope to drop dead if I do," the major declared, stoutly. "I've no idea, sir."

"But who could have entered my room without your assistance?"

"I have no idea! I have no idea!"

Iron-Nerve drew his revolver, and leveled it at the host's heart.

"Major," he said, sternly, "I believe you are lying to me. Do you tell me whom you admitted to my room, or I'll clip a piece off from the lower lobe of your left lung!"

"Mr. Iron-Nerve," cried the major, folding his arms, "I am a man, and not afraid to die. Shoot me if you like, but I know nothing of the affair."

For a moment Iron-Nerve was fairly stunned, for he felt positive the major did know.

He then put up his weapon.

"If you are telling the truth I ask your pardon," he said. "If you are lying, you've nerve enough to warrant you in getting safely through purgatory, on your own hook. We'll have the eye-opener now."

The major made haste in setting out the best the house afforded, while he secretly flattered himself that he had saved losing a good boarder.

Iron-Nerve said no more, but hastened in to breakfast.

After satisfying his appetite, he put on his hat and ordered his horse for a ride.

While waiting on the veranda for the horse to be brought, he struck up a conversation with a miner, who, he soon found out, knew every one, and pretty nearly every one's business in Pokerville.

"Not many women in the camp, I take it?" Iron-Nerve remarked.

"Durned few, an' most all married, as it is. 'Liza Jane's 'bout the peartest 'round hyer-ways."

"A likely girl. Family named Leigh lives here, not?"

"Leigh? Waal, thar ain't much o' a family. Hyer comes the head o' it," and the man indicated a giant, rough-looking miner, who, mounted upon a mule and accompanied by a sneakish-looking dog, had just ridden up.

"Heavens! that can't be her father!" was Iron-Nerve's thought.

"Hello, Leigh," sung out the Sport's informant. "Hyer's a feller as hes bin inquire' about the Leigh family. Guess you're 'bout the full deck, hey?"

The giant spat out a huge quid, and looked at Iron-Nerve, speculatively.

"Yas, the hull family's prisent—Bill Leigh, Jerusha Leigh, and Canine Leigh."

"You're not possessed of a daughter, or niece, then?" Iron-Nerve queried.

"Nary, pardner! Married a squaw, but arterward planted her, 'cause she tried to raise my ha'r!"

"Guess you're not the party I refer to then."

His horse having been brought around, he leaped into the saddle, and dashed out of the camp, toward the open country.

"There's something queer about this," he mused, as he galloped along. "There seems no way of my solving the mystery. But, solve it I will, if it takes an age."

Avoiding the Elms, he rode along, so preoccupied in meditation that he scarcely noticed where he was going, until he found himself upon the shore of Lake Theo, opposite from the Elms.

This sheet of water was about a mile and a half long, from the Elms to its end, where Iron-Nerve halted, and was not over half a mile wide. The water was very clear, as the lake was remarkably deep, and nearest its center was a densely-wooded island, of not over a half-acre's extent, which gave the lakelet a picturesque appearance.

Henry Wetherill had caused a tiny sail-boat to be placed upon the waters, and there were also several row-boats.

One of these, a light two-oared skiff, was anchored about fifty feet out, from where Iron-Nerve had halted.

"I've a mind to capture it, and row over to the island," he mused. "I hardly think the haughty colonel can object."

He led his horse into a slight arroyo, near at hand, and then, equipped with a lasso, approached the water's edge.

A skilled throw of the lasso settled the noose over the bow of the boat, and he soon had it ashore.

Springing in, he pulled for the island.

It took but a short time to reach it, and beaching the skiff, he plunged into the hardly penetrable thicket of chaparral, which grew upon the isle, to the water's edge.

After considerable labor, he reached the middle of the isle, where there was a slight clearing.

Here, to his unbounded surprise, he found two mounds, which he rightly concluded were graves. One was overgrown with grass: the other was fresher.

Who was buried here?

Some of the Wetherills?

Iron-Nerve judged not.

Henry Wetherill was a rich man, and would not likely bury his family here, without erecting something to mark the spot.

"There's more than one secret about the Elms, and I fancy I am on the right trail!" the Sport muttered. "The girl 'Liza Jane, is concerned in trying to ferret out something, too, if I mistake not. I'll try to join her to my interests, the very next time we meet. As for these graves, I mean to see who is in them, ere long. Hello!"

The wind had increased, and it was growing suddenly dark.

"It's a storm. They spring up, quickly, in these parts. I presume my best plan will be to remain here, until it's over, as I'm booked for a ducking, anyhow!"

The sound of excited voices caught his ears.

He hastily crept toward the side of the island nearest the Elms.

Here, a swift, sweeping glance, discovered several things.

It was getting very dark, the wind was increasing in velocity, and a deluge of rain was but a few minutes off, at the furthest.

That was not all.

Driving down the lakelet, under full sail, and swaying to and fro, like a drunken thing, came the Wetherill sail-boat—a mere toy in the grasp of the tornado. Certainly it was doomed to be a wreck.

Theo and Carmen were the terrified occupants;—way down at the further end of the lake, an excited crowd were shouting and gesticulating, like so many lunatics let loose.

Carmen was doing his best to keep the boat from going ashore, for it was aiming for the island, but it was a hard job.

His hat was gone—he looked like a frenzied pirate.

Theo, uttering appeals for help, was clinging to the side of the boat, white as death.

"The boat's a goner!" Iron-Nerve muttered, "but he can save the girl, if he will."

Carmen had now got the boat headed too far away from the island, and just as the rain began to descend, in torrents, a sudden gust capsize the craft, when she was a good hundred yards from the island.

"Swim! swim!" Carmen shrieked, himself

striking out for the mainland, leaving Theo struggling in the water.

"The cursed brute!" escaped from Iron-Nerve's lips, and the next instant his jacket was off, and he was in the water, swimming toward her.

"Cheer up; keep afloat!" he cried. "I'll save you!"

He saw her go down, and his heart sunk within him, but with superhuman strokes, he sped through the water, and caught her, as she arose for the last time to the surface.

"Thank God!" he gasped; then, placing her on his back, he struck out for the island.

At last, in a nearly exhausted condition, he reached it, and laid her fainting, upon the ground.

The storm was now nearing the height of its fury, and he could see nothing of the mainland, and was satisfied that none of those, thereon, were certain of Theo's fate.

The rain upon her face quickly revived her, and he assisted her to arise.

"May Heaven reward you, sir, for your bravery!" she said, gazing at the tempest-tossed waters with a shudder. "Did he get ashore, sir?"

"Your husband you mean?" he said.

"Yes—no! I mean the contemptible coward who was with me!"

She spoke with terrible bitterness.

"I guess he got out, all right, although the storm hid him from view, so that I am not certain."

"Oh! why! oh! why did he not perish?" she moaned, clasping her hands, in agony, and seeming not to realize the Sport's presence.

"If you will step further into the chaparral, you will not be so much exposed to the storm!" he said, to change the subject.

She turned toward him, with a startled expression.

"Excuse me—I forgot you when I was speaking. But, it matters not. I care not who knows my hatred for him, whom I am forced to wed. But we're not married yet—oh! no! no! no!" she almost screamed.

Iron-Nerve wondered if she was going mad.

"Be calm!" he enjoined earnestly.

"Calm. Ha! ha! no! I'll be stormy—who wouldn't?"

Then she turned and gazed at him, with her searching eyes, now black as jet, in her excitement.

"Who are you?" she asked, abruptly.

"I am called Iron-Nerve. I was at the Elms, last night."

"Were you? Excuse me. I didn't see you. I was stupefied with drugs, given me to make me marry Clinton Carmen. Oh! I comprehend. You visited the house, earlier in the evening?"

"I did."

"Then, forgive me for my part in what occurred there. It would have cost me my life to have done different. You do not know the Elms, nor the inner life at the Elms, and consider yourself fortunate that you don't!"

"Thank you for your confidence, Mrs. Carmen; but there is nothing for you to forgive."

"Mrs. Carmen?"

She laughed contemptuously. "When I am wedded to Mr. Carmen by proper authority, then I will be Mrs. Carmen. Until then, I am Theo Wetherill. Priggins is a detective, not a minister. Do you remember the tower—But stop. I forget sometimes. I'd get twenty lashes were it known I am so thoughtless. I seldom get free from restraint, and when I do—"

And her teeth shut together with a click.

She was silent a few moments, shuddering occasionally at the fury of the storm.

Finally she turned to him.

"We are strangers, sir—that is, you never saw me before last night?"

"Not that I remember."

"Well, it matters not. It will probably be so arranged by the colonel that we will be strangers hereafter. But I think I can trust you."

"If you desire, I will vouch for it!"

"Enough said. I have something here I want you to take and keep for me until I call for it," and she took from her pocket a richly-carved silver snuff-box, the lid of which was sealed with wax. "This is it. This box contains something Carmen would give much to destroy. It also contains that of which, did I possess the missing link, I would be the happiest woman alive. Take it, sealed as it is, and keep it. Should I die, if you are near, bury it with me."

"I will do so, Miss Wetherill, and you can rely on me. It is something of a novelty for me to take charge of a lady's trust, but I am square in all my dealings."

"Ah! if that could only be said of all men.

You are a single man, sir?"

"I am."

"You propose to hunt the dragon?"

"I do."

"Be careful, sir, for my sake. You have saved my life; I must warn you to keep watch for your own safety. Perhaps it will be saying enough that you are not popular at the Elms."

"No need to tell me that. I see the storm is somewhat abating. As soon as it is over I will row you home. My horse is at the lower end of the lake, but I can trust him to remain there until you are safely home."

"Thank you. I shall never forget your kindness."

The sky began to lighten rapidly, and the rain to cease; so Iron-Nerve pushed through the thicket to the further end of the island, and rowed the skiff around to where he had left Theo.

Assisting her to a seat facing him, he then pulled toward the mansion.

Half the distance was accomplished, when they suddenly saw Carmen and a ranchman on the right-hand bank, near which they were proceeding.

"Hello, there! Pull ashore here!" the ducked dandy cried, hoarsely. "I'll take charge of that lady myself!"

"Will you?" Iron-Nerve shouted back. "I reckon you won't—not till we reach the Elms!"

"Curse you! pull ashore, I say!" Carmen yelled, furiously.

"Hear the jealous fool!" Miss Wetherill said, with a smile. "You will not mind him, sir."

"Certainly not!" Iron-Nerve replied, bending to the oars and causing the skiff to fairly leap over the water.

Carmen followed along the shore at a run, howling anathemas at each bound, so that he reached the Elms landing only a moment after the boat, and just as Iron-Nerve was assisting Theo to alight.

Up to the Sport the infuriated man rushed, fairly frothing at the mouth in his rage.

"Curse you!" he yelled, seizing the Sport by the shoulder; "why didn't you pull ashore when I ordered you to?"

"Take your hand from my shoulder, sir!" Iron-Nerve ordered, threateningly.

"Answer me!" shrieked Carmen.

He got his answer with a suddenness that was wonderful, for the Sport's hardened right fist shot out in a well-aimed blow and struck Carmen full in the mouth with such force as to knock him a considerable distance out into the water, where he would have drowned but for assistance of two rancheros, who got him ashore in a senseless condition.

"See here, sir!" Henry Wetherill cried, striding up. "I'll have none of this work. Why did you hit that gentleman?"

"Because I chose, sir. A man who will leave a lady to drown, deserves killing! I have returned your daughter, sir, in safety, and will bid you good-day!"

"Stop!" Theo cried. "You shall not go, until my father thanks you. More, your horse is at the other end of the lake. One of the men shall go for it."

"Excuse me, Miss Wetherill, for that would be useless. No man on your ranch could touch that animal, without my being present."

"The gentleman knows best," Henry Wetherill said, half scowling at Theo, "and has my sincere thanks. Come, Theo—you must change your attire."

Theo turned, and seized the Sport's hand.

"I, too, thank you, sir, and you shall not lose by to-day's ducking!"

She then turned, and followed the Nabob into the mansion, whither Carmen had already been carried.

CHAPTER X.

LIZA'S BOLD VENTURE, AND IRON-NERVE'S JAMBOREE.

LIZA JANE, as she stealthily pursued the trail of Dumb Dick, could not conceive where he was going, for her discovery that he was a somnambulist rather upset all her calculations.

Eagerly she followed, however, believing that through this manner of procedure, she would gain some further knowledge of the mystery that concerned his life.

For half an hour they moved on; then, Dick paused and looked back, as if, in his somnambulist state, he heard his pursuer.

Liza Jane stood perfectly still, in the shadow of the gulch wall, and finally the sleep-walker hurried on, again; nor did he pause, until he had passed Pokerville, and stood within a hundred yards of the residence at the Elms.

Liza Jane was not a hundred feet behind him, her face flushed with eager anticipation.

Oh! if she could only solve the mystery that enveloped the life of him, whose welfare she held so dearly at heart—for she loved the speechless man, whom she had so faithfully watched over, and she was not mistaken in her belief that he loved her in return, with all the power of his manly nature.

As he paused under the shadow of one of the trees upon the lawn, Liza Jane saw him raise his gaze toward the tower of the mansion, although his eyes were closed.

This tower was high, and at the top had been so built, that a number of persons with a small cannon or galling gun, could command a large sweep of the surrounding country.

A man could stand on its top within its forked irregular stone railing, and see everything that was going on below, without exposing much of his person to bullet range.

Below this surmounting battlement, there were singular little grated windows in the sides of the structure, which looked as if they might furnish light for dungeons within.

Toward this tower the mute's face was turned, and Liza Jane's gaze was turned that way, too, but she saw nothing but the gray stone, and the grated windows.

The lawn was deserted, for the roysterers of the wedding festival, had gone, and there were no lights visible in the Elms, to indicate that any one was awake.

Drybreak was not far off.

Liza Jane wondered if Dumb Dick would stand there forever, for she grew impatient, at his inactivity.

The answer soon came, for, with a peculiar cry he turned mechanically, and strode back toward Dragon Gulch.

"I'll let him return!" Liza Jane mused.

"He'll go all right, I'll guarantee."

Accordingly, she did not return with him, but crept closer to the Elms.

Her eyes burned with a stern, resolute fire.

"There are secrets about that place, and it is for me to find them out," she said, to herself.

"Poor Dick has a claim here, I shall always believe, and if I am right, no power except Almighty power, shall keep him from having his own. I am here, once more, to-night, and I shall not leave without at least gaining some knowledge. My exploration of the house, a few hours ago, did not satisfy me. I was in nearly every apartment, from cellar up, but not in the tower. I found but one door leading to that, and that opens off of Wetherill's bed-room. It was nailed shut, and is not to be easily opened. There seem to be no secrets about the house, unless they are locked up in that tower. If there, I will soon know."

Beginning from the ground, a net-work of vines crept up the cold gray sides of the tower, to the battlements. To a person of practical judgment, these vines would hardly have appeared strong enough, to bear up under the weight of a squirrel; and certainly the most venturesome climber would have shuddered, at the thought of risking life in a rash attempt to reach the turret-top, by way of the net-work of vines.

Yet the piercing gaze of the Girl Miner rested upon the fearful ladder of chance, speculatively, noting almost the turn of each twig and stem, as it had reached upward.

"I wonder if I am crazy," she murmured.

She crept forward to the foot of the structure.

Examination proved that the vine growth was of two species—that of the true Virginia creeper, and of the real Irish ivy.

"I believe I can go up to the top, without their giving away," she mused. "I can try it a ways, anyhow!"

She secured her revolvers and knife, carefully—slung her rifle to her back; then with a prayer for safety, she began the perilous ascent.

During the first ten feet of her movement, she tried and tested the green ladder with all her strength only to find that the tough strands clung tenaciously to the cold wall.

All fear leaving her, now, she climbed rapidly, and in a few minutes stood in the top of the tower!

She felt like yelling, then, to give vent to her feelings of triumph, but not knowing what perils she might yet encounter, concluded that her wisest course was to keep decidedly quiet.

Looking down into the park, she calculated that she was fully a hundred feet above terra firma.

Turning her attention then, to her present position, she found that the space in the top of the tower was barely large enough for half a

dozen persons to stand in, comfortably. The flooring was of planks, and a small trap-door was included therein.

A shudder passed through the girl's frame, when she noted that there were numerous blood-stains upon both the walls and floor.

"Some foul crime has been perpetrated here, I'll wager!" she mused. "I wonder if it will be healthy for me to go any further, in my explorations? I can't more than get killed, anyhow!"

With a revolver, ready for use, in one hand, she cautiously raised the trap-door, and peered down.

Darkness greeted her vision, at first, but after a steady look, she saw an occasional bar of pale light, which she concluded came in through the windows.

Means of descent were furnished by an iron ladder, which was fastened to the wall by bolts. Who had built the place, had built it well.

"Whole hog or none!" 'Liza Jane muttered resolutely. "I don't see any death's-heads lurking around, anyhow."

The next minute she was going carefully down the ladder.

Before expecting it, she was forced to halt, for she stood upon a tiny landing by a narrow window.

Peering out, she perceived that she was standing on a level with the roof of the mansion.

From the platform, a spiral stairway ran on downward, dark and gloomy.

On the window ledge was a lantern covered with cobwebs, but 'Liza Jane found to her joy that it contained a piece of candle, and there was a slide to shut off the light.

Producing a match, she lit the lantern and closed the slide; then cautiously continued her descent.

She soon came to where a door branched off, and she judged that it was the same one that opened into Colonel Wetherill's bed-chamber.

The stairs continued on, however, and she followed them.

In the course of five minutes, and when she calculated she was some distance below the surface of the earth, she came to the end of the staircase, and found herself in what was evidently an underground passage or cellar.

Wondering if she was doing right, she turned the lantern-gate, letting forth a bar of light.

At the same instant the lantern was dashed from her grasp, and a heavy cloak thrown over her head, after which she was seized bodily and borne swiftly off.

She struggled fiercely, but all to no use. She was powerless in a giant's grasp.

Realizing this fact, and that she had nothing to do but succumb, she ceased struggling, and allowed her captor to hurry her away—but where?

Alas! she knew not.

Iron-Nerve turned away from the landing, as the Wetherills proceeded toward the mansion.

He looked back but once, and then he saw Theo wave her hand to him just as she was about entering the door.

A strange expression was upon his face; his eyes burned with an unusual fire.

"That woman, by Heaven! I almost— But hush! it's madness to think of such a thing. There is nothing about her that reminds me of Laura Leigh, or I'd swear 'twas she!" he muttered, as he strode along down the bank of the lake toward where he had left his horse.

He took from his pocket the crumpled envelope, and extracted from it a photograph which had never been mounted. His eyes gazed at the picture, his face wearing an expression of touching sadness.

It was a round, rosy, plump, girlish face he saw—a laughing, sweetly-mischievous face, too pretty to seem real, with its pouting little mouth, brilliant, expressive eyes, and the well-shaped head, with its wealth of hair arranged with careless abandon.

There was nothing stately or dignified in that face—nothing cold or worldly, yet those eyes—

Iron-Nerve fairly trembled as he recalled the expression of Theo's eyes while she was excitedly talking upon the island.

"My God! I believe it is the girl!" he gasped. "Everything seems to point that way—the cut sleeve, the costly handkerchief, the trust she put in me. Curse it, this matter is unnerving me! Am I again under the influence of the heartless chit of a siren who once wounded me?

Does she think to play with me again, as a child would with a puppet? No! a thousand times no! Be she who she may, she shall not trifle with me. I'm done with women. I'll have nothing to say to her. Let her go to the dog she says she hates. He cannot break her heart, for she has none!"

Grimly he spoke, and it was a relief to his tortured mind when he found himself once more in the saddle and dashing back toward Poker-ville.

He looked so stormy when he strode into the Demijohn that Major Bixby began to feel chills creeping down his spine, in anticipation of trouble in store for him.

But the Sport simply ordered a drink, after which he went in to dinner.

He next took a smoke, on the veranda, where he was joined by the major, who desired to make himself as "solid" with Iron-Nerve, as possible.

The latter seemed moody, and sullen, however, and little inclined to be sociable. It occurring to him, however, that he had not seen the parson around, he inquired of the major concerning him.

"The parson, eh?—the meek-faced chap w'ot fit the duel, wi' Scorpion Sam?"

"The same!" Iron-Nerve answered.

"Du no as I hev seen him since he got up this mornin'. Though now, come to think, I did hear him ask a miner, a while arter, if 'Liza Jane were around."

"Who is that girl, major?"

"Dunno no more 'bout it than you do, sir. She squatted in the gulch, several months ago, put up her cabin, an' hes bin thar since. All that I know is—she an' the Wetherills don't hitch, an' she knows how to look out fer Number One."

"I should infer as much," the Sport assented, languidly tipping back against a pillar of the veranda. "I think I'll take a nap."

Considering himself dismissed, the major went inside to take a "tonic."

For a couple of hours, Iron-Nerve dozed pleasantly; then he was awakened by the major, who held a magnificently mounted and effective-looking bull-whip in his hand.

"Here, Iron-Nerve—ain't it a beauty!" the host cried, triumphantly. "Thar ain't another sich in the mountains."

Iron-Nerve looked it over approvingly.

"It is a good one!" he admitted, handing it back—but the major refused to take it.

"No, no—keep it," he said. "Keep it."

"What use have I for it, pray?"

"Plenty, sir, 'twixt you and me! Iron-Nerve, there's music in the air. I just got an inkling that Clinton Carmen is coming up here to horse-whip you."

"Indeed?"

"You bet! Ye see, Suse—the nigger servant at the Elms—Suse, she war up heer, an' told me to put the flea in yer ear."

"Humph! Is it possible I have one friend at the Elms?" And the Sport smiled grimly.

"It's the whisky, sir—it's the whisky. When Suse's jaws ain't relaxed wi' corn juice, she's mum as a mice."

"Ah!"

"Exactly. An' I ain't told ye all, pard. The feller's comin' heeled."

"So?"

"You bet—with a score or so of rancheros. After he has licked ye, they're goin' to tar an' feather ye, tie ye to a boss wi' a cactus under his tail, an' set ye a-goin' fer furrin parts!"

Iron-Nerve uttered a dry sort of laugh, and his eyes glittered dangerously.

"So, that's their programme, eh? Well, you'll see how well they'll succeed in carrying it out. I'll keep the whip. Just send a waiter up to my room for the extra pair of revolvers that I left on the stand."

The major gleefully dispatched a Chinese servant for the weapons.

A shrewd business man, was the major. He foresaw money in his pocket. If a fight occurred at the Demijohn, he was likely afterward to do a brisk trade at the bar.

About an hour afterward, while still sitting upon the veranda, Iron-Nerve saw a posse of rancheros, headed by Clinton Carmen, coming up the street.

Buttoning his jacket over the bull-whip, he quietly awaited their approach, taking note as they drew near, that there were fifteen of the party, including Carmen and Colonel Wetherill.

The party soon came to a halt, in front of the Demijohn, and the Sport then saw that none of the men wore any weapons visible about their persons—which, however, did not deceive him, for he knew they carried them in conceal-

ment; but Carmen carried a formidable bull-whip in his grasp.

He looked as if he had been badly "left."

His face was so swollen that one eye was nearly closed, and two of his upper front teeth had been knocked out by the Sport's blow.

Iron-Nerve could scarcely repress a smile at sight of him, and sat eying the party in quiet inquiry.

"Mr. Iron Gall, I would have a word with you!" Carmen cried, importantly.

"You would?" was the response. "Then spiel out! I can hear you without disturbing my siesta."

"You coward, dare you step into the street?" Carmen yelled.

"You bet!" was the cool reply, and jerking his whip out from in under his jacket, he leaped from the veranda, out into the street.

CHAPTER XI.

VAMOSING THE RANCH.

'LIZA JANE, the Girl Miner, had no doubt, as she was borne along, that she had stumbled into an unenviable trap, and that an unknown terrible fate was in store for her.

Her captor ran swiftly for a short distance—then suddenly debouched into a large, subterranean vault, or chamber, which was lighted by numerous bonfires.

The chamber bottom covered an extent of fully an acre, and its walls were composed of stone masonry. The ceiling was planked to keep dirt from falling, and supported here and there by ponderous stone pillars. The ground floor or surface was of sandy formation, and rough and irregular, large seams and holes proving that gold had been mined for here.

The bottom was also muddy in the lower portions, but at the further side was a level elevation, containing a number of wigwams of skins, and here, too, was a fire.

From this main chamber, in every direction, branched off narrow hall-like passages, which probably penetrated into the bowels of the earth.

As 'Liza Jane's captor approached the wigwams, he gave vent to a peculiar cry, and three masked, bearded men, in miner's garb, darted from a neighboring passage.

They took the Girl Miner from the grasp of her captor, who was also masked, and disarming her, bound her hands behind her back, and bade her be seated on a camp-stool.

The whole four, then, retired to one of the passages, consulting in low tones as they went.

'Liza Jane was surprised at this, for her feet were not bound, and there was nothing to hinder her flying away.

She waited several minutes, and as no one returned, she set her teeth together, fully determined to make an attempt to escape.

She was aware that she could run like a deer, and she knew that nothing short of a bullet could stop her, once she had an opening, unless some one headed her off.

Rising, she darted forward toward the entrance to the passage by which she believed they had made ingress to the main chamber.

To her great joy she gained the entrance and rushed into the passage.

The next instant her elation turned to terror, as the howl of a bloodhound broke upon her hearing.

"Great God! I shall be torn to pieces!" she gasped, running as she had never run before.

On—on—on! and the yelp of the savage pursuer grew nearer.

Suddenly, in her blind rush, she banged against a door which barricaded the way.

The tremendous force with which she struck the door, burst it open and she fell headlong upon the threshold, her senses leaving her.

When she recovered consciousness, she found herself in what appeared to be a wine-cellar, for numerous barrels and cases of bottles were strewn about.

She was lying upon her side, and squatting beside her, holding a lighted candle, was a fat negress—no less a personage than Suse, the Wetherill family servant.

"De Lor' bress ye, chile, ye done hab a nar-rer 'scape," she said, as 'Liza Jane opened her eyes. "How d'ye come in de secret mine?"

"I climbed the tower," our heroine gasped. "The dogs—where are they?"

"Whar dey nebber trubble no one, missy. I done cotch 'em, cut deir throats, an' fro' de miners off de trail!"

"Then, am I safe—are you my friend?"

"Bet your life I is, honey. Suse is ebery-body's friend but Hank Wetherill's; he hab to pay fo' my friendship."

"Where is he?"

"Done gone up to Pokerville, wid de gossoon Carmen, fo' b' to clean out de huckleberry Sport, miss. Oh! dar's fearful goin's-on at de Elms, to-day, missy—fearful goin's-on, suah!"

"How do you mean, Suse?"

"Oh! de Lor', missy, I can't 'splain eberyting missy, all at once; but, bress ye, ole Suse knows de hull t'ing frum beginning to end!"

"You do, Suse?" 'Liza cried excitedly. "Do you know of the Elms's past hist'ry, Suse?"

"Eberty'ing, missy—eberty'ing. I wouldn't tell you dis, gal, but I hope fo' God, dis am Suse's las' day at de Elms!"

"Are you going to leave, Suse?"

"Deed I is, miss, 'deed I is! Dar's bin bad doin's to-day; de guests am packin' up to leab, an' Suse is gwine, too. Dunno where, missy, but anyw'ar's to git out ob de reach ob de hellhound, Hank Wetherill!"

"Suse, come to my home. I will hide you, and you will be safe. Ere long I intend to leave this vicinity, and you shall go with me."

"Bress youh, chile—I'll do it—I'll do it; but de Lor' knows, I can't go an' leab de missus."

"The mistress?"

"De gal, chile—de Missy Theo. Dar she be layin' up in de library, a-moanin' till ye'd done blubber right out, wid her back all cut up in stripes. Oh! it's awful!"

'Liza Jane arose, white and stern.

"For God's sake, explain, Suse!" she said.

"I will, missy, de best I can. You knows she was married. Well, de marriage wassn't legal, or suffin' like dat, an'—well, de cunnel has allus whipped her, but to day was de wust—Lor', 'deed it was!"

"Youh see Carmen took de young leddy a-sailin', an' de storm come up, dis forenoon, an' capsize de boat. Carmen swum ashore an' Theo done was rescued by de Iron-Nerve chap. Dat make Carmen awful jealous, an' he git knocked down an' his front teeth done knocked out. Well, when he come to, he demanded of de colonel a marriage at once. De missy 'clare up an' down dat she nebber would marry him—dat she lub de Iron-Nerve, an' nebber marry any one else. Den de cunnel knock her down an' Carmen kick her. Den dey strip her to de waist, an' while Carmen hold her de cunnel whip her till she faint. Den dey go off up to camp to lick de Sport. I skins up 'head of 'em an' gibs warnin', an' hyer I se back ag'in."

"God bless you, Suse! Though this may be a dark day for some, you shall never regret it. I'll guarantee a better master for the Elms soon. Now let me see. Iron-Nerve can take care of himself. Miss Wetherill must be attended to first. What time is it, Suse?"

"Nigh sundown, missy."

"So much the better. Have the guests all gone, Suse?"

"I go see, honey."

"Do so, and return quickly."

Suse was not gone long.

When she returned her eyes were literally as big as saucers.

"Sich folks!" she said. "Dey hab done jest lef' de Elms, bag an' baggage, an' am trampin' up to de camp to catch de stage. Dey done jes' go off an' leab de missy alone, an' so hab de servants. Guess eberybody scart out 'cept Suse."

"The day is a dark one for Henry Wetherill!" the Girl Miner said, grimly. "Take me to Theo."

They left the vault.

In five minutes they were in the grand library, where Theo lay upon the sofa, her face buried in a pillow. She was moaning piteously. Suse and 'Liza Jane knelt by her side.

"Sister," the Girl Miner said, "are you badly hurt?"

Theo's tearful face looked up in piteous surprise.

"You here?" she gasped. "Oh, Heaven! do true friends come when enemies leave me? Why are you here?"

"To be your friend and help you, dear."

"But I have always treated you so badly! I—I—"

"Don't think of that, Theo. I have heard of your trouble, and I pity you," and she bent forward and kissed the pallid brow. "This is no place for you, dear. Every one has gone. It is likely Carmen and the colonel will soon return. My home is open to you, Theo. Will you come with us? Suse is going too."

A glad look came over her face.

"Yes, I will go with you. May God bless you for taking me away from here!"

She arose with an effort, and Suse helped her to make preparations to leave.

While they were thus busied 'Liza Jane took

a stroll through the house, which was now deserted.

When all was in readiness Suse procured three saddle-horses from the stable, which they mounted and then set out on their journey to the Girl Miner's cabin.

'Liza Jane knew she was undertaking a responsibility that was liable to bring her trouble, but she was none the less resolute and brave.

It was dusk when they left the Elms, so that they were not seen, and by passing through the outskirts of Pokerville they got into the gulch without attracting attention and reached the cabin in safety.

Here they found Parson Priggins seated in the doorway.

"I've been waiting for you all day," he said. "The stage man at the camp had a package for you, and so I offered to fetch it up."

"It's the battery!" 'Liza Jane cried. "Now I'll know if Dick can ever speak or not."

They all entered the cabin, and thence went into the cavern.

Dumb Dick lay upon his couch, fast asleep.

"The fellow near startled the wits out of me, a bit ago," Priggins said. "I didn't know of this secret apartment until I saw him suddenly emerge from it and go out for a drink of water. He looked at me suspiciously, then returned to the cave."

"He is paralyzed—he cannot speak," 'Liza Jane said. "I hope no one else has seen him during my absence."

"But there has. While he was after the water, I saw a man, a piece down the gulch, watching him. When your mute came in, the man went toward Pokerville."

"A spy!" 'Liza Jane said, grimly. "I'll not be surprised if Henry Wetherill's gang attack the cabin to-night."

She then explained to Priggins concerning her recent adventures.

"Wetherill has about run to the end of his rope. I have sent for detectives to help me arrest him. He is wanted in the South for murder and abduction, of fifteen years' standing."

This was said low, but reached Theo's ears nevertheless.

"Murder and abduction!" she cried, excitedly. "Am I not his child?"

"No, ma'am. You are of a fine Southern family, from whom Wetherill stole you out of revenge. I have been hunting you for years, and Wetherill knows it—knows that only a desperate course of action can now save him. Theo, you are my own sister!"

Great excitement then followed for the moment, and warm was the reunion of the brother and sister.

In the mean time, 'Liza Jane was engaged in preparing the battery, and the others became deeply interested.

At last she had it in readiness.

"I am going to experiment with my last hope for poor Dick," she explained. "If electricity won't relieve him, nothing will."

He was lying upon his side, still sleeping. His hands were partly unclenched, as they had so long been, in their position behind his back.

She slipped the two electric handles into his grasp and placed the battery on the chair.

The next instant she turned on the full current!

With a wild yell, he rolled from the bed and gained his feet.

He had lost his grip on the handles, and his arms and hands were back in their natural position!

He gazed at 'Liza Jane with an expression of profound gratitude; then, suddenly seizing her in his arms, he turned to the spectators and said:

"God is good. Glory be to His name!"

CHAPTER XII.

AWFUL DOIN'S.

LET us return to Pokerville.

"Dar's been awful goin's-on to-day," the negress, Suse, said to 'Liza Jane, and yet she could hardly realize in full the truth of her words.

There were awful goings-on, but they had only fairly commenced.

When Iron-Nerve leaped into the street with the whip in his hand, it is only fair to say that Clinton Carmen was surprised, for he did not anticipate that two could, on so short notice, engage in a game of cowhiding.

He therefore shrunk back, but the hissing voice of Henry Wetherill in his ear caused him to brace up courageously.

"Don't you show the coward!" the colonel commanded.

Iron-Nerve advanced until within possible striking-distance of the dandy, when he paused and eyed Carmen with a stern, unwavering glance, that made the villain quail.

"I am here, Sir Dude!" he said. "State your errand."

"You need hardly ask that," Carmen sneered. "I have come here to thrash you within an inch of your life."

"After which, you having satisfied your spite, you'll turn what's left of me over to your intended daddy-in-law to tar and feather, and then send me off on a horse with a cactus stalk under its tail, eh?" the Sport cried, with bitter emphasis.

"Exactly, sir. But how did you learn so much?" and both Carmen and Wetherill stared.

"I am not a circulating library of information, so I cannot inform you. Are you ready to proceed?"

"That's just what I am," Carmen declared. "You're going to stand up and take it like a man. My men are to force you to do it. They are all armed!"

"Yas, an' thar's a few o' us in the same predicament!" Major Bixby yelled, leaping down the steps. "See hyer, ye skunks, thar ain't goin' to be no monkey business 'round heer. Eh, Pokers? See fair play, won't we?"

And the crowd yelled assent.

As a majority, they rather liked the Sport, and did not like Wetherill or his rancheros.

"Yas, everything's goin' to be squar' 'round hyer, if the court knows herself!" cried a plucky miner well named Battle. "You two fellers aire so fond o' one another, ye've jest got ter strip an' hev it out, lickety-cut! We'll see fair play an' no favors."

This proposition was greeted by another cheer from the Pokervillians.

Henry Wetherill uttered an oath.

"This shall not be. The Sport is too much for my friend. I'll give five hundred dollars to the man that will capture the Sport."

Iron-Nerve felt that he was in jeopardy, and the offer maddened him. Quickly raising the whip, he struck the dandy a cut across the face that laid the flesh open. At the same instant a dozen of the roughs, from both sides, sprung upon the Sport.

But he was not taken.

His knife was in his hand, and he used it with terrible effect, for with awful quickness, he had made a clearing, and a dozen dead men lay upon the ground!

Then a pistol-shot struck him near the heart, and he fell like a log.

A great yell of victory went up, and he was seized and bound.

"He is not dead!" Henry Wetherill cried. "Restore him to consciousness. He shall pay dearly for this work!"

Iron-Nerve had not been severely hurt.

But for the fact that he had slipped the little box he had received from Theo into his left vest-pocket, his heart would have been pierced by the treacherous shot.

He was revived without trouble, and surrounded by the rancheros, each of whom held a pistol leveled ready for emergency, in case the resolute man should attempt escape.

"Now, then!" Colonel Wetherill cried, "I presume you'll admit that you'll take a cowhiding, you infernal rough!"

"You have the temporary advantage!" Iron-Nerve gritted, "but if it is your turn now, it will be mine next!"

"Will it? You'll find your next turn in eternity. Boys, tie his hands in front of him and cut the clothing from his back. To-day will demonstrate that I run this camp."

"Yas, that's right, cunnel—you an' I runs the town ourselves!" broke in Scorpion Sam, who had fired the shot at the Sport. "It's a blizzardous day when I an' the cunnel don't have our say."

Iron-Nerve's wrists were bound in front of him, as had been directed, and the keen-edged knives of the ranchmen soon had all the clothing cut away from he upper portions of his body down to his belt.

He submitted to all this, his face set hard, and his eyes gleaming.

Nothing was to be gained by a bold attempt to escape. He well knew he would be shot down before he could get a dozen yards away.

Of those who had offered to back him, there were now but half a dozen, including the major, the best share of the crowd having sided in with Wetherill's gang, in hopes of getting a slice out of the offered five hundred dollars, or of having a good time at the colonel's expense.

Bixby and these few, who were in the minority, as compared with the Nabob's crowd, stood grimly to one side, looking on, and realizing that they were powerless to render assistance.

As soon as Iron-Nerve's back was bared, Colonel Wetherill turned to Carmen, who had been tying up his cut face.

"Carmen, now is your chance. Hurry up and get through with this matter, for I expect to have other work to do before this day is over."

Carmen seized the Sport's whip, which lay on the ground.

"Ha! ha!" he cried, with devilish exultance. "You bet I'll attend to the fellow in proper style. I say, my man, we'll see whether you are rightly called Iron-Nerve. With the whip you would have tickled me, I'll tickle you, and don't you forget it! Will you beg?"

Iron-Nerve smiled defiantly, but made no answer.

"No beg about him!" sung Major Bixby.

"You shut up, or you'll get a taste of it!" Colonel Wetherill called out sternly.

Carmen rolled up his sleeves, spat on his hands, and was ready.

"You won't beg, eh!" he leered. "Well, I'll give you ten lashes and see how you'll like it!"

And with all his strength, he struck the initial blow!

A red welt across the Sport's white back was the result.

Wetherill averted his face. Wretch though he was, he could not shudder as his imagination asked him what he would do were he the victim.

Iron-Nerve winced a trifle and his teeth were set as by a vise, but he uttered no sound. His face was pale, but defiant, and terrible in its expression.

"Give him twenty lashes—that will be sufficient," the colonel ordered. "Then we'll douse him with salt water, and start him off. Don't be careful how you hit him, Carmen. Don't be at all tender-hearted!"

"No fear of that!" was the savage answer, and the villain continued to pile on the blows, with all the force he knew how.

Not a sound from Iron-Nerve.

The flesh on his back was laid open in great gashes, and the blood dripped from him, in streams; but he stood the terrible torture, without a groan, or a murmur of pain.

The crowd of rancheros looked on loweringly. Roughest of the rough, even though they were, their hearts went out for the Sport, and they could but commend his wonderful grit.

At the twentieth blow, Carmen had just got his hand in, and showed no disposition to stop.

"I'll finish him, but what he shall cry," he yelled, with the fury of a demon.

The rancheros exchanged glances; then, one of them stepped forward.

"Let up thar! We're solid wi' the colonel, but this whippin' has gone fur enough—eh, boys?" he cried.

The others assented.

"Of course—throw down your whip, Carmen!" the Nabob cried, not caring to go against the will of his backers.

Carmen obeyed, unwillingly.

"I ought to kill him," he cried.

Henry Wetherill then produced a bucket of strongly salted water, and dashed it upon the Sport's back.

Iron-Nerve groaned, at this.

His agony was excruciating.

"Ha! ha! that fetches the music out of him!" Carmen yelled.

"Your musical days are to come!" Iron-Nerve replied. "My curse rests on you, you cowardly brute."

"Your curse is of little account!" Henry Wetherill said. "You should feel grateful that we do not kill you. Carter, go get this devil's horse." A faint expression of pain came over the Sport's face.

He knew his horse was in the stable, securely tied; otherwise, no man in Pokerville could approach it.

Three men set out for the fiery animal, and soon returned with it, having all they could do, to hold it.

Iron-Nerve was then seized, and tied upon his own back across the horse's back, his head and heels dangling downward.

"Now, then," Henry Wetherill said, "when the cactus is slipped in under your charger's tail, farewell. You'll never see your loving friends, here, again, sad though it may be. We would honor you with a coat of tar and feathers, but have none handy. Thus ends your lover's hope of ever again seeing Theo—once your Laura Leigh. Ha! ha! The other time I forced her to turn you off—this time, I try a different method. Your fair Laura has profited by the same punishment, as you. Ready, boys!"

Iron-Nerve heard, and he also comprehended all. Laura had never been false to him!

All now, pointed to this fact.

He would have answered, but at this instant, his horse gave a scream of pain, and bounded furiously away, up the gulch, 'mid yells from the crowd.

On! on! on! it tore, like some mad creature, and he expected every minute to have his brains dashed out, against the rocks.

On! on! on! He wondered if the suffering brute ever would stop.

It did stop, all of a sudden.

They were over a mile up the gulch, however.

The cactus had become detached from in under the horse's tail.

It paused, with a snort, and gazed about, as if at a loss what to do.

"Billy!" the sport called. "Billy!"

The animal turned its neck around, in evident surprise. Then, recognizing its master, it gave expression to its delight in a low whinny, and evidently realizing its master's situation, began biting at the lariats, which bound his hands, as he reached out his arms to encourage the sagacious brute's work.

Carefully, faithfully it worked, growing momentarily more eager to release its owner's cruel bonds. The thongs rapidly softened under the hot moist breath and sharp teeth, and in five minutes the Sport's arms were free! Then, it took him but a short time, to gain his liberty.

He then dismounted, and with some remnants of his cut garments, bathed his back in the water of the gulch creek.

Among the rags dangling about his waist to his astonishment was his vest, held fast by the pistol-belt. Quickly he examined its inside pocket and there safe but not sound was the little silver box, but the bullet shock had opened the lid, and there lay before the Sport's gaze, the ring—the tiny gold circlet which he had given Laura Leigh in Omaha!

"Thank God!" he murmured. "She is still true to me."

Placing the treasure in a pocket of his trousers, which were yet whole, he remounted his horse, and headed back for Pokerville.

He soon came to the 'Liza Jane shanty, but saw no one, and was unaware of its ownership.

A sudden thought striking him, he headed Billy into the glen, and halted him among the pines.

"I'll hang around here until dark," he mused. "Then I can slip into Pokerville, and get some clothing and weapons from the major."

From where he had halted he could observe the cabin. Seeing no stir, he finally concluded it was untenanted, and so stole toward it.

On reaching the door he saw, to his surprise, that Priggins was inside, fast asleep in his chair.

Upon the wall Iron-Nerve saw a miner's shirt hanging, and also several rifles, revolvers, and cartridge-belts.

Resolved not to disturb the parson, he took off his boots, and stole into the cabin, with the stealth of a cat as it nears its prey.

Without difficulty he procured the shirt, and an old sombrero; then a rifle, a pair of revolvers, and such ammunition as he needed.

Thus equipped, he returned to the glen, and in due time, was fixed up in a more presentable style.

He was suffering much from his lacerated back, and throwing himself upon the ground thick with the dead spines of the mountain pine, he passed off into a deep and refreshing sleep.

It was after dark when he awakened, and his horse was lying down near at hand.

He rose, feeling stiff and sore, and was in the act of preparing to start for Pokerville, when he heard voices.

He crouched down by Billy, and listened.

Presently two men came stealthily up the glen, from the direction of the cabin, and plunged deeper into the forest.

They passed but a short distance from him, and he recognized them as roughs he had seen in Pokerville.

"The colonel says this is the last night," one of them said as they passed.

"Yas. I reckon he's after the sixty thousand dollars."

"Well, we can't growl. We've made our pile, an' we've bin lucky to git off so neat."

"You bet. I'm glad it's to be thrown up. I'm tired out. It's my turn, eh? Well, I hope it is the last. D'ye know, I've wondered some one didn't pop a bullet right in under the fetlock, an' lame the burro!"

Iron-Nerve did not catch the answer.

He had arisen to his feet.

His face was flushed with triumph.

"Sooner than I expected!" he muttered. "I have it, now. I'll work the clew!"

Motioning his sagacious animal to remain where it was, he set out on the trail of the two roughs.

He tracked them to a cavern a mile from 'Liza Jane's abode, and there, on entering, they lit a torch.

Iron-Nerve watched their movements eagerly.

First of all, a small but wiry burro was led forth, and one of the men mounted it, lying face downward and lengthwise upon the animal's back.

In this position, and holding the reins, he was strapped by his companion.

Then, from overhead, an ingenious contrivance was lowered, which, when fitted strapped and tied down, completely hid the burro and rider from sight, and represented the winged crocodile and the Devil Don!

It was a remarkably clever piece of mechanism, as Iron-Nerve could see. The crocodile body and all that covered the burro, except its legs, appeared to be made of sheet-iron worked and painted artistically to represent what it did. The leggings were of steel chain-net. The ghostly figure was of india-rubber, painted white; consequently, both dragon and rider were bullet-proof.

When so much had been done, Bones, the assistant, mounted a stool, and with a can, poured a quantity of liquid of some kind into a tiny hole between the crocodile's eyes; next he applied the lighted torch to the eyes and mouth, and jets of flame leaped therefrom.

Then, seizing a can of prepared phosphorus, he washed the dragon with it, and said:

"Thar! I guess you'll do fer ter-night, Jimmy. It's our last night, anyhow. I'll slip down to Poker an' collect w'at's comin' from the colonel, then, arter ter-night, we'll light out fer other parts wi' our invention, an' speckilate on it."

"Not yet!" Iron-Nerve cried, leaping into the cave, and seizing the burro by the uncovered bits, at the same time covering Bones with a revolver. "Throw down your weapons, or you're a dead man!"

Bones uttered an oath, and hesitated.

"Obey!" Iron-Nerve cried, "for the game's up! If you would live, you have but one choice."

"The jig's up, Bones," piped Jimmy's voice from under the covering. "Don't be a fool!"

Bones threw his weapons down.

"Take that rope," Iron-Nerve ordered, "and tie this burro's legs together."

Doggedly the man obeyed, covered with that threatening revolver.

"Now, more rope," was Iron-Nerve's next command.

"What ye goin' to do?" Bones growled.

"Tie you, of course. You are my prisoners for the present. Obey, or flat you go on your face—a dead Wetherill tough!"

"But, sir, ye're not goin' to let us get lynched, aire ye?"

"Oh, no! Obey me and I'll see that no one harms you. I may take you into my own employ."

"Hillo! ain't ye goin' to let me out o' hyer? It's no comfortable posish, boss," groaned Jimmy.

"Keep quiet, and remain as you are for the present," was the significant rejoinder.

Binding Bones securely, Iron-Nerve then picked up his rifle.

"I'll be back ere long, likely. No one will disturb you till I return, I dare say."

With feelings of victory he then set out for Pokerville.

"It's ten thousand dollars I haven't lost, but fifty thousand I've won," he muttered. "A fellow can stand a sore back or so for that."

CHAPTER XIII.

DICK DALLAS SPEAKS.

As he reached 'Liza Jane's cabin, Iron-Nerve concluded to enter it, and see if Priggins were still there; but when he stalked into the room, the parson was not to be seen.

An instant later, however, 'Liza Jane came from the cavern apartment.

"Iron-Nerve," she ejaculated, "you are a welcome visitor, indeed. Come in here," and she led the way into the cavern, where but a few moments prior to the Sport's arrival she had accomplished such magical results with the flattery in restoring Dumb Dick from his semi-paralysis of limbs, and entire paralysis of tongue.

Iron-Nerve uttered an exclamation of astonishment, as by the firelight he saw the group collected within the cavern.

"Well, he said, turning to 'Liza Jane, "you have quite a houseful of visitors. Perhaps I am intruding."

"No! no! no!" 'Liza cried. "You are more than welcome. But your garments are stained with blood, sir; are you wounded badly?"

"A little cut in the back is all. I got a horse-whipping at the camp this afternoon. I'm but little the worse for it, though."

The eyes of the Sport then became riveted upon the face of Dick.

'Liza Jane saw the two men regarding each other, and asked almost unconsciously:

"Iron-Nerve, do you know this gentleman who looks so much like you?"

Both men had grown a trifle paler.

"Great God! Dick, Dick Dallas—my brother—can this indeed be you?" Iron-Nerve gasped, extending his hand.

Which the other seized, heartily.

"Yes, I am indeed Dick Dallas, though it has been many months since I have been able to speak the name, until to-night. I owe all to her," and he pointed to 'Liza Jane. "But, it cannot be possible—"

"That I am your brother, Nathan Norcross Dallas?"

"Exactly."

"Then, know that it is possible, for I am none other!"

And the brothers then indulged in a good old-fashioned hug.

"I never expected to see you again, though I came down into this country, in hopes of finding some trace of you, and of father and mother."

"Their faces you will never see again," Dick Dallas said, sadly. Then, he turned to 'Liza Jane:

"My faithful friend, I suppose you are anxious to hear my story, and since you have bestowed upon me the precious gift of speech, you shall know all."

"This is the first time I have met my brother, in ten years, for, that many years ago it was, that he ran away from our home, in Nebraska, and became a ranger, in the far western wilds. I, however, remained with my father, and a year after Nat's departure, we heard of his death, in an Indian massacre."

"About this time, my father came to this section, and being well-to-do, bought up all the tract of land, comprised in the estate known as the Elms!"

All looked surprised, except 'Liza Jane.

"My father, a little later, by a fortunate speculation, made nearly a million dollars, and at once set to work working the Elms into a beautiful home, using money without stint, and employing the best workmen to be procured. When the Elms was built, we made a discovery that a vast mine of gold was underlying our residence, and so determined to keep it a secret, until we had worked out all we needed of it."

"For years we mined, and no one was the wiser for it, for our home was in the heart of the wilderness then; and when I tell you that a large share of our profit was laid out about the Elms, you may not wonder that such a stately home exists, as it does, to-day. At last, however, father took an old friend into the secret—a boyhood chum of his, Donald Carmen by name."

"Things went on well, for awhile, but finally Carmen turned up missing. Father would never believe anything was wrong, until, one night Carmen took us by surprise. He came back with a pal named Leigh,—that's the name, 'Liza—and a dozen ruffians to back him!"

"Leigh! That is my name!" ejaculated the parson.

"Henry Wetherill frequently assumed the name, years ago," Theo put in.

"Ah! he, then, is the man who accompanied old Carmen!" Dick averred. "Well, we were all taken captive, and Carmen had us imprisoned in the mine. Here we were kept, for months. Finally my mother died, of the damp and exposure, and not long after, Wetherill shot my father down dead. A quarrel then ensued, between Carmen and Leigh, or Wetherill, and I never saw Carmen again. The ruffian miners, who never left the mine, said Carmen had left the Elms, with his death-wound."

"Well, about three years ago, as near as I remember, I heard the miners say Leigh had moved into the Elms, and was living in great style. About this time, I made an attempt to escape, aided by our old

servant yonder Suse—Heaven bless her! It was a failure, though, and I was terribly beaten. Soon after, however, I made another attempt, and succeeded. *I leaped from the top of the tower of the Elms, to the ground!*

A cry of horror escaped the listeners, at which Dick Dallas laughed.

"A desperate man may do many things," he said. "Of myself, however, and of my wanderings, from that day, until about a year ago, I know not. I was demented—utterly out of my wits. I have a faint recollection of that, and that I was hunted. A year ago, I was found by 'Liza Jane, and she has made me what I am!"

And he put his arm around her waist, and drew her to him.

"Nat," he went on, "the Elms is ours, and we have each a son's vengeance to wreak on Henry Wetherill!"

"True, Dick; I owe him no good-will, you can bet! Priggins, I captured the dragon, to-night, and have it, with the two men whom Wetherill hired to work the invention, safely caged!"

"The money is in Miss 'Liza Jane's hands, sir. My name, however, is not Priggins, but Gerald Leigh, of the Crescent City detective force. This young lady is my sister, and I hope no one will think ill of her for being a member of Henry Wetherill's household, as he abducted her, when but a child, and she declares her innocence of any complicity in his villainy. Indeed, she has suffered terribly at his hands."

"Miss Leigh is cleared of everything," Iron-Nerve said, bowing, but not raising his gaze to Theo's pale face. "Miss 'Liza, you will still continue as banker of the wager money. Dick and I have work to do, yet."

"What, Iron-Nerve?"

"Henry Wetherill is a murderer! He must face me and fight!"

"I have a warrant for his arrest, sir, for murder, of long standing," Gerald Leigh spoke up. "But since your claim is stronger than mine I will withdraw from the case. To-morrow, however, I will arrest Clinton Carmen, and with my sister, bid you all good-by."

"What would you arrest Clinton Carmen for?" 'Liza Jane cried, excitedly.

"Ah, excuse me! Perhaps I am treading on some one's toes, eh?" and the detective laughed. "You see, miss, while I was up in Oregon recently a warrant was given me for the arrest of one Clinton Carmen wherever found, for the murder of one Mabel Dare."

"Then your case is identical with mine. I am Mabel Dare's sister Jennie—'Liza Jane being merely a whim to hide my identity—and I am here to settle with Clinton Carmen myself!" the Girl Miner cried.

"Not while I'm your pard!" Dick Dallas interposed. "I'll just attend to any little accounts that rest with you to settle, my true friend! This Carmen must be a relative of Wetherill's chum, and I owe him a grudge on that account."

"Then let's get ready for a visit to the Elms!" Iron-Nerve suggested. "There is no time like the present for matters of this kind."

"If 'Liza Jane will look out for my sister and Suse I will accompany you," Gerald Leigh announced.

"You bet I'll look out for 'em!" was 'Liza's assurance. "I only wish I had a hand in the circus too. My pard will fill the bill, though. Come along into the cabin and I'll rig you all out with weapons sufficient to start a cemetery at least."

They all followed the cheery elf except Theo, and Iron-Nerve, seeing that she intended to remain behind, lingered also.

"I wanted to tell you that to your little silver box I owe my life," he said, stepping closer to her. "I carried it in my vest-pocket, and but for its presence there to-day a bullet would have entered my heart."

"Indeed! Then I am so glad I gave it to you," she murmured, her gaze averted.

"The lid got open by the shock of the bullet, and I could not resist the temptation to take a peep at the treasure," he said. "Laura, may I place my little ring back upon your finger?"

She gave him a startled glance and buried her face in her hands as he drew her toward him.

"Oh, Nat! you know not what you are saying!" she sobbed. "You do not mean it—you are mocking me in my misery!"

"Far from it, Laura. I am not the man to do that. I know what you would say—that I can never forgive that cruel blow dealt me, at Omaha? Did I not know that you were forced to write, as you did, by Henry Wetherill, I should not forgive you, easily."

"Then you know—?"

"Enough to satisfy me. Wetherill, this afternoon, made his brags that he forced you to write the letter. You visited me at the hotel?"

"Yes! I could not rest until I was satisfied that it was you. Oh, Nat, do you fully forgive me? Then I can go with my brother, to-morrow, with a lighter heart."

"I forgive you, if there is anything to forgive—but, my jewel, you shall never leave me again. Tell me one thing, dear—did old Blood Bixby let you into my room?"

"Yes—but oh! don't scold him. I made him promise!"

"The infernal old scamp! Well, there's one thing—he'll lie like blazes before he'll break a promise!"

The parson, as we shall still call him, popped into the cavern just then, and started at seeing the Sport's arm about Theo, in a very lover-like fashion.

"Hello!" he demanded; "what's this?"

"A matter of a year's standing, sir, just come to a

focus," Iron-Nerve replied. "Parson, this is my intended wife!"

"Waal, dog my cats of things ain't getting rather warm!" the parson ejaculated, wiping his forehead. "I escaped from the other room so as not to interfere with a sort of billing-and-cooing match. Reckon I'm left out in the cold, unless I tackle old Suse."

Half an hour later the three men, well-armed and mounted, rode rapidly toward Pokerville.

It was moonlight and pleasant, and they chatted sociably until they reached the Demijohn, where they dismounted.

The major was standing on the veranda, looking down the street where a crowd of men were congregated.

"Hillo, Iron-Nerve, you old hunk!" the major cried, seizing the Sport's hand. "Still alive, yet, I see. Did all I could fer ye, boy. 'Twa'n't no use, tho'. Queer how things will take a turn, eh? Yesterday Henry Wetherill was the biggest gun, hyerways, an' now I wouldn't give ten cents fer his scalp."

"What's wrong?"

"Why, ye see, arter you war sent off, he and the rancheros had some words, an' he discharged the hull passel."

"An unwise move, I should say."

"Jest bet. The fellers didn't say much, at first, but begun fillin' up on whisky, an' they've got 'bout a tankful, now. That's them down yonder. They're goin' to pay the colonel a visit at midnight, an' ye kin judge what'll happen."

"Then we must get in ahead of them," Iron-Nerve declared. "Major, this is my brother, Richard Dallas—the rightful owner of the Elms. Henry Wetherill does not own an acre of the place, as can be easily proved."

"Well, well! of all things!" and the major shook Dick's hand, warmly. "Bet yer life Pokerville will back ye, young man, every day in a week! Come in, boys. On the head of this we must have an eye-opener."

The eye-opener was had, and then Iron-Nerve asked:

"Where is the whelp, Clinton Carmen?"

"He went along w' the cunnel," the major replied.

"So much the better. We'll gobble the both of them. By the way, major, I have a request to ask of you."

"State it, sir—it's already granted."

"It is this: Write up to the fort and have a chaplain come down. I and Theo Wetherill propose to get married."

"Great Jupiter! Then I'm goin' to get spliced to the widder at the same time!"

"And, major, as we shall stop at the Demijohn a few days, I want a special lock put on the door of my room."

The major eyed the Sport a moment.

"See here friend," he asked, "aire 'ye screwin' around at a hint?"

"Not exactly: I think I gave it straight from the shoulder."

"Well, by gosh! Did that gal go squawk on me?"

"Precisely what she did, you old sinner. But, on account of the huge size of your gall, I'll have to forgive you, this time."

They had another eye-opener then, and, mounting their horses, rode down to the Elms, which looked like some grim castle in the spectral moonlight.

Leaving their horses at the edge of the park, they crept toward the mansion.

As soon as they had approached near enough, they perceived that the hall door was wide open, and upon the threshold, weltering in blood, lay Clinton Carmen—dead!

"One life less to dispose of," Iron-Nerve muttered.

"The tiger has evidently killed his own mate. I dare say Wetherill has taken flight."

Such however, was not the case.

In his own bed-chamber, lying upon the snowy bed, the colonel lay, his face white and blood streaming from his side and dyeing the counterpane.

He looked up with a glare of defiance, as he saw the trio enter—his surprise did not seem to increase at sight of Dick Dallas.

"I thought you were not dead," he said, raising himself on his elbow; "in fact I was quite sure of it. I suspected that 'Liza Jane had you hid away. Was I right?"

"Quite," Dick Dallas answered.

"It is my fault," he went on, as coolly as though speaking of some trivial matter. "I ought to have had the girl killed. It can matter but little now, however. The game's about up. I can't hold out more than half an hour, then the Elms will be yours. You'll find the papers and everything in my library."

"Indeed! Then you've concluded to give up?"

"There seems little else for me to do. I've played my cards for all they're worth, and lost after all. There were too many knaves in the hand. Where is Theo?"

"Safe in my protection!" Iron-Nerve cried. "Henry Wetherill, are you able to stand and meet me face to face?"

"I am not. If you choose, you can shoot me where I lay, or wait till death comes—which will be ere many minutes."

"I strike no helpless man, even though he were the murderer of my father and mother. Are those their graves upon the island?"

"They are."

"You did something wonderful in burying them at all! Who killed Carmen?"

"I did. He tried to kill me, to get full possession here, and we had it out. I guess he did as much for me as I did for him."

Then a hard expression flitted over his face.

"You haven't captured the dragon yet, I dare say?" he at length remarked.

"On the contrary, I have. I have both Bones and Jimmy secured in the cave. That's a clever invention—the dragon—but I'll give it away to-morrow."

"Well, I suppose so. It's been a bad day. I've had my time, though, and can't growl. I suppose I'll have to make the best of it. Do you see this?"

He touched one of two knobs that were affixed to the wall at his bedside.

"I see!" Iron-Nerve responded.

"Then watch!"

He gave the knob a violent jerk.

"That signifies that the gold mine beneath this castle is flooded, and henceforth of no value. The jerk of that knob opened a secret flood-gate connecting from the lake. Five minutes will suffice to fill the mine!"

"But there are your miners in the mine!" Iron-Nerve cried, horrified.

"Let them die as I do!" was the answer.

The next instant he had placed a pistol to his head and fired!

It was the last act in the drama for him, and the two brothers and the detective left the Elms, their vengeance most fully appeased.

Henry Wetherill and Clinton Carmen were buried next day upon the ranch, and a wooden slab placed upon each grave, to tell who lay beneath the sod.

After undergoing some changes, the Elms was taken possession of by Suse and a retinue of servants.

About a month later there was a wedding at the Elms, to which all Pokerville had an invitation; that is, there was one wedding, and two others as accompaniments.

Iron-Nerve, the Sport invincible, took as a partner for life, the one of his choice, Laura Leigh.

The second couple was our heroine, 'Liza Jane, alias Jennie Dare, and Dick, and in taking Dick Dallas for a life partner she not only made an excellent choice, but became mistress of the Elms, Iron-Nerve and Laura, later removing to Oregon.

Major Blood Bixby married the "widder," Mrs. G. Washington Williams, and as she had some wealth, a claim in Howlin' Bar, and an easy temper, the major declared he had struck a veritable bonanza.

After the wedding, a little sensation was created by a shot being fired through the open window at Iron-Nerve. A search was made, and Scorpion Sam captured.

The Pokervillians wanted no greater provocation than this, and as Sam was a bad character, one of the elms of the park was utilized, and he was disposed of in short order.

Before leaving Pokerville, Iron-Nerve permitted Bones and Jimmy to escape, and he exhibited the dragon-invention to many curious ones, after which he presented it to Dick as a guard-of-safety to the Elms.

Wetherill had indeed flooded the mines; but the ranch was a fortune, and Dick and 'Liza Jane have as nice a home as heart could wish.

While with the wager money, Iron-Nerve and Laura are well content, the parson living near them.

THE END.

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